MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY

A VILLAGE ART OF SOUTH INDIA

THE WORK OF THE VELAR

Stephen Inglis

PUBLICATION DIVISION

A VILLAGE ART OF SOUTH INDIA

By

Stephen Inglis

Madurai Kamaraj University

Department of Tamil Studies

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Dr. M. SHANMUGAM PILLAI,
B.SC., M.A., M.LITT., PH.D.,
Professor and Head of the
Department of Tamil Studies,
Madurai Kamaraj University, Palkalai Nagar,
Madurai - 625021
Tamil Nadu, INDIA.

VILLAGE ART

Foreward

The great traditions of art in South India have for centuries inspired the interests of scholars. More recently, local art traditions too have become a subject of interest. The importance of the study of these local arts, often performed by rural people, can hardly be overestimated, as many are now disappearing.

Graduate students of the Department of Tamil Studies at Madurai Kamaraj University are now making an important contribution toward recording aspects of Folk Arts in Tamilnadu. Through the basic Tamil language programmes supported by the University, foreign students are also being given an opportunity to participate. This survey of the art of Velar Potters is an example of a project begun by a visiting language student with the encouragement of many people of the Madurai area.

The potters of Tamilnadu have a rich history, documented in ancient literature and inscriptions. Their modelling of images for village temples is a widespread art to which people in the towns and visitors have little access. It is hoped that studies of this kind will continue to explore the diversity of the artistic traditions in this area.

Prof. M. Shanmugam Pillai
Madurai 1980

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Village Art of South India

Introduction

This study was originally written as the documentation of a collection made for the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Canada. The collection represents a major area of folk art relatively unknown to people outside the group that makes and uses its own creations namely, the South Indian, and more specifically, Tamil village potter and his village neighbours. Terracotta modelling, in rural Tamil Nadu especially, has been virtually ignored by scholars. The few collections of this work that I have heard of[1] with their limited documentation hardly hint at the vast extent and sophistication of the arts in Tamil villages. Any bibliography on the subject of South Indian village art and religion (and the two topics are intimately related as I shall attempt to describe) would be very limited. Even those publications dealing with the folk art or

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1. L. Dumont's collection in Paris and that gathered by Stella Kramrisch for her "Unknown India" exhibition (Kramrisch 1968).

terracotta art of India seldom mention the work of the South Indian potter. In comparison with other folk artists of India, his work is poorly represented in Indian museum collections.[2]

This situation can be explained at least partly by the fact that all of the traditional "artistic" work of the Tamil potter is done for religious purpose by specific private arrangement. The terracotta figures he creates are sequestered in small rural temples from the time that they are made until they fall apart. This work is almost never seen in big towns or cities, sold at fairs, or displayed. It is never, to my knowledge, sold on an open market (for one partial exception see p. 57). The few small terracotta figures now sold at emporiums and tourist spots around Tamil Nadu have very little connection in form or in spirit with the traditional and contemporary forms.

A collection of terracotta figures was possible, nonetheless, because this is a living folk art. The figures in the collection are modelled, with all respect to traditional ideals, in the most up-to-date 1975 style. Both the work of the past and the possibilities for the future will be discussed at length.

One dimension of the figures in this collection is, however, missing. They have never been used for the purpose for which figures of this type are usually made; they have not been offered, installed, annointed, or worshipped. Although their creation involved a degree of sanctity, the figures in the collection were made especially for me as secular examples. This is as it must be. Once installed in a village temple, terracotta figures are never moved away; they become part of that place and there melt back into the soil.

A major problem encountered with more or less unfortunate results by the few scholars with an interest in South Indian village religion or art has been the baffling extent of local variation. One local god or offering may serve different purposes in neighbouring villages and the purpose or importance

2. It is limited to a few examples in the Tamil Nadu State Museum, Madras and the Meenakshi Temple Art Museum, Madurai.

of a particular god may change during a very short time. The art style as well as the iconographical details popular in one temple may change radically, even over a decade and within a small group of villages one may see a variety of styles. Thus to generalize on the basis of a limited descriptive approach to an area as large as Tamil Nadu or South India (as attempted by Whitehead in 1921) is bound to be misleading. Structural theory seems to have been only slightly more successful when applied to data from a few villages backed by the "floating facts" of previous studies (Dumont, 1970). I don't hope here to offer a different approach but only to offer some additional information for anyone's use or enjoyment, made more accessible perhaps through a focus on art and presentation through the museum.

My guide and teacher, Mr. K. Muthusamy, is a potter and high school art teacher of village *Ārappāḷaiyam* in Madurai District, Tamil Nadu (see map, p. 68). This village has, over the past few decades, been absorbed by the city of Madurai. During the fall and spring of 1974-75, he and I would set out early in the mornings, visit three or four villages and their temples, photograph the figures of gods and offerings, and talk to the priests and local people. We usually travelled by bicycle, although on occasions when it was necessary to go long distances we took local buses and rented cycles in small towns. In a few cases we walked several miles on small paths through the fields and hills and to visit an isolated place. In these ways we visited forty village temples in *Madurai*, *Nilakkōṭṭai*, *Tirumaṅgalam*, and *Mēlūr*, Taluks of Madurai District and *Siva gaṅgai* Taluk of Ramnad District. The villages were "chosen" at random. We would usually hear from a village man or woman, often from a priest, of a village temple or rural area worth visiting because of a coming festival or because of some powerful god. It was in Muthusamy's house and those of his relatives in *Ārappāḷaiyam* that I saw the potters at work and was able to participate in some of the everyday routines as well as celebrations of potters and their families.

One cannot generalize from this collection and its documentation to other districts of Tamil Nadu or to other parts of South India. The observations made here apply directly and with reasonable certainty only to Madurai District and to a lesser extent, Ramnad District (adjoining Madurai District). Nonetheless I have noted similarities to the work in other parts of the state, especially in Tiruchirāpaḷḷy, Thanjāvūr, Tirunelvēli, and Cōimbatōre Districts. Many of the village gods worshipped and figures offered in the vicinity of Madurai do enjoy popularity which extends over the whole of Tamil Nadu and into the other Dravidian states of Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Many details of inspiration and style evident in the pieces of the collection and the body of folk art it represents undoubtedly invite comparison to folk arts of other regions of India, however the local and transitional character of the arts of the potter is the initial and immediate concern.

I wish to acknowledge the guidance and encouragement of two fine people: Mr. A. V. Jeyachandran, Curator, Meenakshiamman Temple Art Museum, Madurai and Dr. G. Vijaya Venugopa of the Department of Tamil Studies, Madurai University. The Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute has supported my graduate studies in India. I wish to thank Professor Michael Ames and Professor Brenda Beck of the University of British Columbia, Canada and the teachers and directors of the Tamil language programs at Madurai University for their suggestions. Dr. M. Shanmugam Pillai, Professor of Tamil and Madurai University have kindly undertaken this publication. John Wood, Audrey Hawthorn, Joy Inglis, Allen Froese and Shelly Inglish have been a great help to me. This study has been made possible through the grace and never failing hospitality of Muthusamy, Gandymathy and their endless relations among the potters of Madurai District.

Introductory Notes

Whenever a Tamil word is used, I have tried to include an English transcription of the word, according to the Tamil Lexicon (MADRAS UNIVERSITY, 1936) its correct spelling in Tamil, and a translation if there is one. An "s" often be added to an English transcription to denote a plural, although this is of course not technically correct. In many cases the word given is the one used by village people rather than the word used by city folk to describe the same material or process. Sanskrit words are given in popluar English spellings.

The name of most Tamil village gods is made of a conjunction of the god's name and the suffix, *cāmi* (சாமி), also spelled *cuvāmi* (சுவாமி). This term is derived from Sanskrit and is equivalent to the common term in English, "swamy". The popular meaning is "respected one" or, in this context, simply "god."

The name of most female gods is made in a similar way, using the suffix *ammaṉ* (அம்மன்). This is a form of *ammā* (அம்மா) or "mother" but in this context it means "respected female" or "goddess." Other suffixes used to make names will be noted as they occur.

In discussing village gods, I have adopted no formula for referring to many-named gods, except to use the most common form or the form used in a particular case. This may be confusing at times; for example, *Karuppu* (கருப்பு) or "black," *Karuppaṉ* (கருப்பன்) or "the black one," *Karuppucāmi* (கருப்பு சாமி) or "black god," and *Karuppaṇacāmi* (கருப்பணசாமி) or "the black god" are all names used in different places to refer to the same village god. There are eight other names by which various forms of this great god are known in the small area of my visits to village temples.

The photographs have been selected carefully, most to illustrate a number of details and should be consulted as indicated in the text. The notes which accompany the photographs may be useful in supplementing the main text.

Throughout this paper, the word "mud" is used to describe the material with which the potter works, both in its fired and unfired state. This is as accurate a term as "clay" or "terracotta" and is the closest equivalent to Tamil terms used by village people. A technical description of the actual materials used will be given.

I. Potter, Artist, and Priest

Potter

The potter in Tamil Nadu, as in most other parts of India, provides villagers with many of the containers and utensils for domestic use. In most South Indian villages one street or section of huts is the home and workplace of a group of potter families (photo I).

Potters in India are usually referred to by some variation of the Sanskrit word ***Kumba*** or "pot" — e.g. ***kummara*** (Telugu), ***kumbaro*** (Oriya), and ***kumbara*** (Canarese). In Tamil Nadu potters are commonly called (by other groups) ***kuyavar*** (குயவர்), from the Sanskrit word ***kusavar***. This is the respectful form of ***kuyavaṉ*** from the Sanskrit ***ku***, "earth," and ***avan***, "person."

The government now officially refers to potter groups in Tamil Nadu as ***kulālar*** (குலாலர்), again the respectful form. This term is also derived from Sanskrit and has its origin, according to Thurston (1909 : 112) in a legend about ***Kulālaṉ***, son of Brahma, who wanted to create and destroy things daily and so become a potter (small utensils of mud are often used only once and then broken).

The term that potters used for their own group in Madurai District is *vēḷār* (வேளார்).[1] Potters will be referred to in this way throughout this paper. Although both men and women work side by side when making pots (photo 2), the making of mud figures and other work for the village temples seems to be men's work and thus the term *vēḷār* will be used most often in reference to the male members of the group.

Vēḷārs of Madurai District make fine pots. Mānāmadurai a town southeast of Madurai in Ramnad District, is renown, for the finest pots in the state. The bulk of the vēlār's work consists of making common water and storage pots called *maṇpāñai* (மண்பானை) or simply *pāṉai*. These are begun with the lip and upper section thrown on a wheel and the bottom moulded by a hammer and anvil technique (photo 3). Two types of wheel are commonly used : one wooden and spoked like a cartwheel and the other made of solid mud with a stone cone inset to turn on.[2] Both wheels are driven by hand, sometimes with the assitance of a lever-stick. A variety of hand techniques are used to make other common items such as country stoves and livestock watering troughs (photo 4). More specialized items are the huge ***kulumai*** (குலுமை), grain (paddy) storage pots, and ***viḷakkukkūṭu*** (விளக்குக்கூடு), lamp covers for shrines (photo 5).

Many items are made according to demand at certain times of the year, such as the small dishes used as lamps at *Kārttikai* (கார்த்திகை), the Tamil *Dīpāvaḷi* (Festival of Lights) (photo 6). Various ritual pots, often painted or decorated, are made for annual celebrations, marriages, and festivals. Mud pots are sold in markets at cities and towns and account for only a part of the *vēḷārs* output. Many products are sold directly to local people or are bartered and traded with other craftsmen and farmers from the *vēḷār's* front porch area, the place where the products have been made and stored.

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1. For some discussion of vēḷār groups, see Behura 1964 : 19-38.

2. Both these wheels and a number of other potting tools are described in detail in Behura and Saraswati 1964 : 1-37.

Artist

Among most groups of *vēḷārs* there is a family or number of families carrying the traditional responsibility of making the mud images of gods and offerings for the village temple. In a village with a large community of *vēḷārs*. several families may participate in this work (or a very large family occupying several households). A *vēḷār* may make mud images for only part of his working life or only at special times during the year according to shifting responsibilities and requirements. A detailed consideration of these responsibilities and the full extent of the *vēḷār's* art will be provided in the latter part of this study.

Priest

Very closely associated with the making of mud figures is the service of the priest of the village temples where the figures are installed (the use of the term "village temple" will be explained in the section under that heading). The priest who presides at the installation of mud figures and at subsequent *pūja* or worship is often a *vēḷār* from the family who made the figures and frequently he is the artist himself.

There are explanations as to why *vēḷārs* of Madurai District enjoy the status that allows them to wear the sacred thread and perform the important religious tasks in the village. The *vēḷārs* feel that they are intimately associated with the life processes of their fellow villagers providing for their daily needs from birth, when the birth sac breaks (symbolized by a pot), until death, when a mud pot is broken at the funeral pyre by a close relative of the deceased. Until relatively recently, *vēḷārs* played a very important part in the ritual of South Indian marriages. A popular South Indian story tells of the descent of potters from a Brahmin father and a Sudra mother; the mother provided the occupational heritage and the father, the priestly. In South Indian villages, as in most of rural India, the performance of religious rites is associated, at least in theory, with Brahmins.

Another justification for *vēḷārs* conducting worship is explained through their legendary importance in the ancient kingdoms of South India. The *vēḷār* prepared the utensils of daily use for the kings and queens and, most importantly, fashioned the large mud burial urns in which members of royalty were buried.[1] Excellent examples of conceivably similar urns are on display at the Tamil Nadu State Museum. The task of making these urns has been glorified in poetry of the Caṅkam (சங்கம்) literature of ancient Tamil Nadu which is the foundation of Tamil literature atleast as early as the first millenium B. C.[2] Tamils often refer to *Caṅkam* literature as authoritative traditional history and as a guide to social morality, much as North Indians refer to the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas.

The name of a common village priest is *pūcāri* (பூசாரி), a word of Sanskritic derivation used in many parts of India. Although *pūcāris* of other than *vēḷār* castes conduct worship, *vēḷār pūcāri* is dominate in the area of my observations and therefore when reference is made to *pūcāri* it can be taken to mean *vēḷār pūcāri*. The *pūcāri* has been described to me as the "official" or "permanent" priest (although this is not always the case), "servant of god," or more whimsically, "one who serves god all the time like a Christian father" (photo 7).

The actual ceremonial responsibilities of a *pūcāri* will be outlined in the section dealing with village festivals but we may now discuss the position itself. The privilege of being a *pūcāri* (both advantages and disadvantages will become apparent) is hereditary. It is passed from father to son or other close relative and is inextricably tied to a particular village temple.[3] The *pūcāri* and his family usually live in the village of the temple he serves or

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1. This continued as late as the eigth century according to Thurston (1909: 188). This was during the Pandyan period in the Madurai area.

2. An account by M. Arokiaswami (1972) is useful here.

3. Elmore 1915 : 68-70 records cases of women pusaris, however I encountered none.

in a village nearby. His family should have long, preferably "eternal," historical relationships with the temple. If a man has two sons, he may share the responsibilities between them; each son may take charge for six months or a year at a time. Male relatives of an extended family may also share the duties In many cases, a number of *vēḷār* families share the responsibilities of *pūcāri* for particular temples, each taking their turn in successive years. Variations on this formula involving more sons families etc. are really endless and often disputes arise among relations claiming the privileges.

Such disputes are resolved in a number of different ways. Some of the resolutions discussed here apply also in cases where there is no successor and a new family must be chosen from among the local *vēḷārs*. The people gather, often in the village temple, and some type of *pūja* is offered. Names of qualified prospects or of disputing parties are written on small pieces of paper and are put in a basket before the god or the papers can also be scattered before the god. A small child, least likely to be influenced by prejudices that might alter the will of god, is coaxed to pick up one of the pieces of paper. As an added precaution the child may be blindfolded. In "older times," coloured petals or whole blossoms of different flowers were used as markers, rather than paper. I was told that identically wrapped packets containing various substances (e.g. ash, vermillion powder) were also used as tokens for selection; in any case, it was by these arrangements that the god made the selection. It was said that occasionally old men of the village would make a judgment and "fairly choose the village priest.." One factor limiting the actual need for such arrangements in *Ārappāḷaiyam* and other villages that I frequented near Madurai was that many *vēḷārs* living there had migrated from other places and were thus effectively barred forever from any consideration of service as a *pūcāri* in the local temples.

Movements and migrations, often due to poverty, can create problems for the position of pūcāri, as may be indicated by this tragic but not untypical personel story. A young vēḷār of a small

village in Ramnad District was forced by poverty to move with his family to the outskirts of Madurai city. His family had been noted village artists and he had been in line for the privilege of ***pūcāri*** in the large and beautiful village temple in the fields near his village This young man's father found work in Madurai, first as a coolie at Meenakshi Mills (a vast cotton milling complex), and then running a *bīḍi* (country cigarette) stall. The former village priest was at one time employed as a "peon" at the great Meenakshiamman temple in Madurai. The family fell apart when the father finally comitted suicide in his economic despair. Luckily the young man was rescued by his new wife's family and set up in a good house in the same area his family had moved to. He was unable however, through this series of events, to perform his duties as ***pūcāri*** in his family's temple, now a two hour journey away (impracticably far from his new home although privileges have been maintained at such distances in exceptional cases). As he had no uncles or brothers in his original village to whom he might have given the privilege, he sold it, "sold the power," for Rs. 200 (about $ 25). This is a lingering source of sadness to the young man, despite the fact that he is now a prosperous member of his community.

The benefits of being a ***pūcāri*** take various forms. A few village temples have collection boxes and donations are sometimes taken at pūja time, from which the ***pūcāri*** may take a share. Some of the larger and better established village temples own lands (predominantly paddy) called ***māṉyam*** (மான்யம்) presented by kings or rich patrons of the past. The ***pūcāri*** is, in some cases, entitled to a share in the revenue from these lands although this was very uncommon in the villages I visited. ***Pūcāris*** are entitled to part of the animals which are sacrificed in the temples they serve (see p.28). If the god dominant in his temple receives goats, the ***pūcāri*** would take the head and possibly a foreleg; the owner of the goat keeps the rest. In this way the ***pūcāri*** may provide himself with mutton or chicken several times a year (both are village delicacies; goat meat is known as "mutton" to many South Indians).

After a festival, in one case twenty days after the proceedings were complete, the pūcāri may take the clothing in which the figures of gods and offerings were dressed for their installation.

/Most important to the pūcāri economically is the grain received from the village or specific sponsors on the occasion of a festival. These grains, for example *cōḷam* (சோளம்) or maize, *varahu* and *Kēppai*(வரகு. கேப்பை) or *rāgi*, and *nel* (நெல்) or paddy, can amount to several bags. If many mud figures have been made by a group under the direction of the *pūcāri*, the grain might be distributed in shares. \

The position of *pūcāri* is one of some prestige, or more correctly, a position through which prestige may be earned. This is no small benefit and in relation to certain privileges, status and prestige are life and death concerns for most Tamil villagers.

The *pūcāri* is in one or more ways compensated for his religious service and special artistic work; yet it seems that during hard times, when festivals are irregular, his position can become a liability. Having limited his dependance to common mud pot making and thereby limiting his own market he can have trouble getting by.

Before leaving this discussion, mention must be made of a "secondaty priest" who can in his own way assist the *vēḷār pūcāri*. This position is not hereditary or in any way predictable; it is *cāmiyāṭi* (சாமியாடி) or one "chosen by god." Under unusual circumstances this man is selected by and speaks for a particular local god.[1] If the *pūcāri* was referred to as a priest, the *cāmiyāṭi* might be better described as a shaman.

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1. The pūcāri can also identify himself closely with the particular god of his service although usually not as strongly as the cāmiyāṭi. For instance the pūcāri of the temple of Caṅkilik Karuppaṉ (சங்கிலிக்கருப்பன்), "Chain Karuppan," wears a chain on his ankle as does the great god whose jingling chain reassures the villagers that he is protecting them during the night.

We met a *cāmiyāṭi* at *Alaṅkānallūr*, an important village centre some distance from Madurai. This man was a *paṟaiyar* (பறையர்), a very low caste and was devoted to *Muṉiyāṇṭi* (முனியாண்டி), (*muṉi* or "sage" and *āṇṭi* or "penniless holy man"), the sole and all powerful god of the local village (photo 8). This *cāmiyāṭi* had through his devotion earned a priestly position of tending the god (*Cāmiyāti* is a position limited by caste and most emerge from the lowest groups). In this case, he administered the inner part of the temple or sanctum, a large tree surrounded by a low wall. The outer courtyard containing a large mounted figure (photo 64) was responsibility of a very respected local *vēḷār*. This *pūcāri* usually performed the *pūjas*. The *Cāmiyāṭi's* touch would be defiling to most worshippers so that he could never distribute *vipūti* (விபூதி) or "holy ash" and perform the other duties of a *pūcāri*.

This *cāmiyāṭi*, as is common in his calling, would become possessed by his god and would at these times act as a mouth-piece for the god. The possessions were most often forecast well in advance so that people could be notified and preparations made. This particular *cāmiyāṭi* had a so become a powerful "wizard" through the grace of god. Several times a year, in demonstration of the god's power running through him, he would circulate on a pre-arranged route through a number of neighbouring villages at a seemingly impossible speed. On a moonless night every light in the selected villages would be extinguished and every sound muffled. The *cāmiyāṭi* would call at the first village at, for instance, 9–00 P.M. and the next, a ten minute run away, at 9-02 P.M. and so on. This is a great source of wonder and pride to local people and the temple is well patronized.

Another type of person who "mediates" between god and a very wide range of village people may be a unique case. This is a *cāmiyāṭi* of sorts who lives in or near village *Pālamēṭu*, near Madurai. He is a singer and a fortune teller and, most interestingly uses the power of a local god to recover lost or

stolen property. After hearing what details of the loss are available, he goes into a trance, vibrating his small tamborine - like drum and receives the necessary information from a powerful god whose temple is six or seven kilometers distant. His instructions often tell where the stolen property will be found. This man told a friend of mine to do nothing about his lost cycle because it would be returned in eight days, after which pūja would have to be done to the god. A small fee is usually paid for the service. My friend did not recover his cycle but the locals attest to the accuracy of this man's service-dead on, "eight out of ten times."

II: Village Gods, Village Temples, and Village Festivals

Village Gods

Several relationships or "level" of worship can be identified in the village of South India. These include worship of family deities in the home; worship of caste or occupational group deities usually at small, rather anonymous shrines; worship of village gods at village temples; and worship of Brahmanical gods (e. g. Siva, Viṣṇu, and their families) at Brahmanical temples, either co-existent with village temples or in large towns and cities. None of these levels is contradictory or mutually exclusive and all are important. The religious life of most villagers consists of a combination of at least two or three of these levels - the categories are not clear - cut and different levels of worship blend together and combine. The work of the *vēḷār* is nevertheless, concerned primarily with the village gods and their temples and consequently this will be the main focus of this section.

Most visitors to Tamil Nadu must imagine, on the basis of their inevitable visits to the great temples, that for the average Tamil the concept of god is developed through the

Brahmanical Hindu pantheon (in the Madurai area for example, Meenakshi, Sundareshwar, and Murugan) worshipped in various forms over much of India and its manifestation in the classical art styles. In fact in Tamil Nadu this is largely an urban system. By "Urban" I mean inspired by, transmitted through, and based in the urban centres, the centres of the ancient kingdoms of 'high,' Hinduism. On the other hand, for the majority of Tamils, that is those who live in the villages, the gods of the important (those who must be consulted with regard to the important problems of life). are a somewhat different group both in spirit and in representation. These gods are rarely seen in the city.

The use of the word "gods" to describe the village deities is only convenient and must be explained. They are more accurately a collection of heroes, warriors, demons and ghosts, both male and female, of varying degrees of importance and popularity.[1] Many village gods are probably local Dravidian gods with a very ancient history in rural Tamil Nadu, one which predates the great Hindu kingdoms and perhaps the Aryan invasions of India (early second millenium B.C.) which shaped so many of the characteristics of Brahmanical Hinduism. Others are legendary local heroes (such as *Maduraivīraṉ* (மதுரைவீரன், or "Madurai Hero") linked with historical events. Some of the popular Brahmanical gods themselves have found a limited acceptance among the village gods (eg. *Viṉāyakar* (விநாயகர்) or Ganesh and *Aṉumār* (அனுமார்) or Hanuman) while, more importantly, "sanskritizing" influences from the dominating urban traditions over centuries have introduced to village gods many Saivite and Vaishnavite characteristics and justifications. This is understandably most obvious in village temples close to or heavily influenced by the city. Other Gods have at some time been imported into the Madurai area by conquerors from other

1. **Exception must be taken here with a major thesis of Bishop Whitehead (1921), supported by Elmore (1915 : 67), that the distinguishing feature of South Indian village religion is the almighty and dominating power of the goddess or female deity. In my observations around the Madurai area this is simply not the case.**

parts of India (e.g. by the Nāyaks, the important late medieval ruling dynasty originally from Telangana, Andhra Pradesh).

There are some characteristics of the village gods as a group which differentiate them from the better known urban gods. It is most important that they satisfy basic practical needs of village people [1] on a more or less individual basis. There is very little development of the ideas of a "pantheon" or another world connected with the village gods. They are almost never referred to collectively by village people (who talk only of "this or that cāmi"). Most village gods are "single" and act alone even though they may share a village temple with a host of other gods. Even those female gods whose names correspond with those of male gods (e.g. *Iruḷāyiammaṉ*) (இருளாயி அம்மன்) or "night mother" and *Iruḷappaṉ* (இருளப்பன்) or *Piṭāriammaṉ* (பிடாரி அம்மன்) and *Piṭāri* (பிடாரி), are seldom thought of as consorts or *Sakti*; rather, they seem to have little relationship at all.[2] Relationships between village gods do, of course, exist but I found most to be particularly and locally determined. "Alter-ego" relationships (as between *Aiyaṉār*(ஐயனார்) and *Karuppaṉ* (கருப்பன்) (Kramrish 1968:57) and "command" of superior gods over inferior (Dumont 1970:30) are undoubtedly important; yet a concern for the local function of each individual god often upsets these formulas. Such localized relationships may be illustrated through the example of the village god *Pāmbāṭṭi Cittaṉ* (பாம்பாட்டிச் சித்தன்) or "Snake Charmer"; (the name almost supposed has originated in the Sanskritic tradition of the eighteen *Cittars* or wandering devotees of siva)." In some temples he is considered to be the benevolent and independent controller of the powerful life force of snakes. At one temple where I admired some particularly beautiful figures of this god (photo 9), I was told that he was dangerous because he controlled snakes and that the powerful main god used him to punish evildoers. *Pāmbāṭṭi Cittaṉ* was in this case, a "peon" (menial labourer) doing the dirty work of the collector (powerful district level official).

1. In this case Whitehead's comments are useful, 1921 : 16.
2. See the discussion of Aiyaṉār and his consorts (p.50) for further development of this theme.

In respect to the practical problems with which they are concerned, village gods are conceptually and ultimately iconographically, more realistic than the urban gods. The great village heroes ride horses (and occasionally bulls and elephants) on their protective rounds rather than the more fanciful peacock, eagle, or rat. Exceptions like the female village god riding a lion can usually be traced directly to some powerful influence of Brahmanical Hindu iconography (in this case, *Durga* and her lion). Most village gods have no *vāhanam* or vehicle at all. Village gods are natural forms of either men or animals (although exaggerated or, more descriptively, "essentialized"), each adhering closely to its mortal characteristics and potentialities. Many village gods are "ghosts" in the sense that they are local historical characters who lived on earth and live on, though less manifestly. There are no man/beast combinations such as the *avatārs* of *Viṣṇu* so popular in urban Hinduism and no *makaras*, *kinnaras* or *yālis*, except where they have filtered in from outside as a minor decorative feature.

It will be useful in attempting to understand the character of village gods, to review some of the situations in which various gods become and remain popular. As a preliminary note to this discussion it must be recalled that, from the outset, the variation in name, form and function of the village gods appears to be quite endless. The first temple I visited, for example, had twenty different gods "under worship" at the time as well as several small offerings in place. This is not unusual in a large village temple. In each subsequent visit to a temple which was new to me, at least in the early stages, I noted gods that I had not seen before. It became apparent that often minor characteristicts of a particular god varied freely from village to village rather than the essential character. It also became apparent that a particular god could accomplish various services for different villages or areas according to various needs. *Māriyammaṉ* (மாரியம்மன்), "Smallpox Goddess", does play an important part in controlling disease in many parts of Tamil Nadu (Whitehead 1921 : 31–2) although not all over the state as he suggests. In some villages of the chronically dry Tirunelvēli District, for example, *Māriyammaṉ* is responsible for weather (and

was on people's minds this year, (1974–75), the driest in forty years. In villages around Madurai, *Māriyammaṉ* is rarely seen; she is not as popular. One exception is a famous *Māriyammaṉ* temple on the outskirts of Madurai, well-known for the god's ability to bless devotees with children. In these cases *Māriyammaṉ* fulfills in different localities at least three of the major concerns entrusted to village gods: disease, weather and the conception and care of children. In one sense the village gods are of endless variety due to the extremely local character of their function and depiction, while collectively they address a limited and fairly homogenous set of basic uncertainties of life encountered by village people.

An important task of the village gods is protection of the village. This is a constant concern of all communities within the village and is perhaps the strongest theme of village level religion. The great horsemen-the beautiful *Aiyaṉār*, or the more ferocious *Karuppaṉ*, *Muṉiyāṇṭi*, and *Muttaiyā* (முத்தையா) or "pearl one"-as well as many others dominate most village temples in Madurai District. They ride about the village at night fighting battles with demons who would encroach, infiltrate and cause harm. Everyone within the village boundary is under the protection of the temple and the boundary, *ellai* (எல்லை), is an important symbol. Boundaries become crucial to people thickly distributed over a plain with no natural boundaries as such (as is the case around Madurai). Disagreements over a bit of land often lead to the fiercest confrontations and longstanding enmities among village people. The boundary is the direct concern of the village god *Piṭāri* (பிடாரி) and his female counterpart, *Piṭāriammaṉ*. Two further variations indicate the wide distribution of this god: *Piṭārikaruppusāmy* (பிடாரி கருப்புசாமி) links him to the great god *Karuppan* and *Ellaipiṭāri* (எல்லைப்பிடாரி) states his purpose (regarding the boundary) directly. *Padra-kāḷi* (பத்ரகாளி), (from the Sanskrit "great" form of the Brahmanical goddess *Kāli*) now commonly seen on the front of massive mounted figures (photo 10) is a renamed boundary guardian according to one suggestion. A majority of village gods, both male and female, are ferocious in their aspect with bulging eyes and prominent canine teeth and are well equipped to

dissuade potential troublemakers.

The prevention of and deliverance from disease are very important tasks of village gods, either approached directly (such as through *Māriyammaṉ* as mentioned above or through the "lame gods" *Cappāṇi* (சப்பாணி) or *Noṇḍikkaruppaṉ* (நொண்டிக் கருப்பன்), ("lame Karuppan,") or through various offerings placed before a powerful god. At some large temples known for the healing power of their gods, small silver talismans that are symbolic of various body parts are on sale. These are placed before the god for relief of specific complaints (available are legs and arms, hands and feet, eyes, ears, and even little noses and stomachs-a small disc with an indentation in the middle). One quaint healing god seen at a forest temple was *Tumpacciammaṉ* (தும்பச்சி அம்மன்), named after an Ayurvedic medicine made from a green (*paccai*, பச்சை) leaf. A local herber told us that this god cured a "great many ailments" and that rather than melting into the ground (which appeared to be the case as only the upper part of the figure remained) this little god was "growing out of the ground."

Among gods particularly likely to grant consideration to villagers wanting children, mention must be made of the popular *Rākkāyiammaṉ* (ராக்காயி அம்மன்), *Kaṉṉimār* (கன்னிமார்), "the virgins" (p.51), and *Nākappacāmi* (நாகப்பசாமி), "cobra god." Children are also sought through various offerings presented to powerful gods (see p. 56).

Although *Aiyaṉār* is often described as the overall protector of agriculture, specific requests and problems concerning farming and weather are referred to a wide range of village gods, often, as in so many situations, depending simply on who the dominant local god may be.

Some village gods can, through their sheer power, solve serious village disputes. One such god is *Mañcamalai Āṇḍi* (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி) or "yellow mountain holy man" (photo 11). If, for instance, a local man is accused by a neighbour of theft and he denies it, the two disputants with the village panchayat (council) leader or some other official may visit the *Mañcamalai* temple. The

man accused of theft will pledge his innccence before the god and some *cūṭam* (சூடம்) camphor might be burnt. This usually satisfies the accuser; anyone would prefer facing the law to lying and facing the displeasure of such a god. A statement of the entire affair, drawn up beforehand, is signed or thumb printed by the participants and left at the temple. Everyone is accountable to the god.

Some gods appeal to different groups within a village. For example, *Vēṭuvaṉ* (வேடுவன்) or "hunter" is the patron of hunters; *Cōṇaicāmi* (சோணைசாமி), (photo 60) is said to appeal mainly to *harijans* and *tēvars* (தேவர்); and *Pēcciammaṉ* (பேச்சிஅம்மன்), "demon goddess" appea's mainly to *kaḷḷars* (கள்ளர்), *maṟavars* (மறவர்), and *ampalakārars* (அம்பலகாரர்). The presence of these gods in a village temple may indicate strong representation of these groups in the village, however, worship of *Cōṇai* and *Pēcci* is certainly not restricted to any group.

Historical and legendary incidents are very important in determining the particular gods which appear in a village temple. One example of a locally conceived account dealing with the origin of a particular god may be recounted. An outcropping of rock shaded by trees near village Kallaṇai is the *Nallayaṉcāmi* (நல்லயன்சாமி) or "Good God" temple. In a prominent position is a raised platform on which stands a figure of the god (photos 12, 13). To the right is *Noṇḍikkaruppaṉ* and old figures of the same gods stand behind. This *Nallayaṉcāmi* is a unique form in the area of my visits and none had heard of him elsewhere. A local man gave us an idea of what had happened.

In the neighbouring village of Valaiyapaṭṭi, a bull had been slaughtered. A harijan girl from Kallaṇai was in Valaiyapaṭṭi and tried to get some meat but was pushed away and abused by the local *Paṟai* (பறை), named after the small drum he uses in his job of "town crier". The girl fell when pushed, was knocked uncons-cious and died. Compensation to Kallaṇai was given in the form of a figure of a god provided by Valaiyapaṭṭi every three years. This compensation was dependant on the condition that the body of this god "never be touched." This god was called *Nallayaṉcāmi*. The

pūcāri at Kallaṉai must go through elaborate purifying rites before offering *pūja* there. This includes up to fifteen days of seclusion, bathing in his hut, avoiding women completely and even keeping his mouth shut for days. It appears that the incident took place only eight or nine years ago and the number of figures at the temple confirms this. This story, all questions of interpretation aside, provides an example of how important locally motivated details of village level worship can be [1]

Other localized gods present at many village temples are *Paṭṭavīraṉ* (பட்டவீரன்) or "dead heroes" that are often memorials to famous persons. *Ādipūcāri* (ஆதிபூசாரி), "First priest," is a memorial to the original priest of a village temple (This may be an influence of the common practice of honouring saints in the great Brahmanical temples of Tamil Nadu). *Caṉṉāci* (சன்னாசி), from the Sanskrit "*sanyāsi*" or wandering holy man, is often seen in village temples and honours the visit of a saint or simply the ideals of the holy life. There seems to be a great deal of reverence in village worship for the holy man or ascetic. Many of the names of great gods use the terms *muṉi* or "sage" and *āṇṭi* or "penniless saint"; even the everpresent *cāmi* has connotations of "holy man."

Village Temples

The village temples are the abode of village gods. The word used for temples of all types is *kōyil* (கோயில்) or *kōvil* (கோவில்). As is the case with village gods, village temples as I define them here are rarely differentiated from other types of temples (Brahmanical or family/lineage); rather, village people refer only to specific temples by name. If it becomes necessary to identify village temples as a group, the reference is to *grāmam kōvil* (கிராமம் கோவில்), "village temple," *ciṉṉa kōvil* (சின்ன கோவில்), "little temple," or *cāmi kōvil*.

As has been mentioned previously, most village temples are the abode of a group of gods. The more important ones can be

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1. Elmore gives many examples of the local origins of particular village gods. See Elmore 1915: chapter 8.

recognized by their prominent positions-usually in a central position or in a sanctum. Most village temples are named after the most important god of that temple. In exceptional cases, a powerful village god may hold a particular temple to himself.

Large village temples, found in large, wealthy or urbanized villages, closely follow the architectural pattern of Brahmanical temples with a high wall pierced by a large set of front doors, a sanctum, areas for cooking holy food and for storage (Photo 14). Often there are a number of subsidiary small sanctums spaced around the interior, each housing an important god. A covered porch running along one or two inside walls is important for protecting the mud figures of gods often placed there. In very "Brahmanized" village temples, decorative architectural features from classical styles such as brackets and capitals are sometimes present. In some of the most substantial village temples, stone sculptures of village gods (usually only ***Aiyaṉar*** and consorts) are permanently placed (photo 15). The origins and styles of these stone figures are various and often enigmatic, lost in a quickly fading history. They are even harder to date or trace than mud figures made by the vēḷār. Some are very powerful sculptures with a lively touch—curiously different than the common stone sculpture made after classical styles. I saw only one metal figure of a village god in a temple, a beautiful bronze ***Karuppucāmi*** cast in 1936. [1]

Smaller forms of the large temple, simpler and more open, are the most common form of village temple (photos 16, 17). Often the smallest and "poorest" villages place the figures of their gods in a sacred spot. In some villages with an elaborate festival tradition, an open area is preferred to the boundaries of walls (photos 18, 19).

Most village temples I visited share certain characteristics regardless of their size. The figures worshipped in village temples

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[1]. Some early Chola bronzes of what are now primarily village gods may be of interest: an *Aiyaṉār* mounted on an elephant (Sivaramamurti 1963: plate 47b) and a *pitāriamman* (Balasubramanyam 1966: plate 2a). The Tamilnadu State Museum has in the Bronze Gallery several representations of *Aiyṉār*, a group of small *Karuppucāmi* figures, and several unidentified figures of village gods. The Indian Museum, Calcutta, has a small collection of South Indian folk bronzes that includes figures of village gods.

are made of mud by the *vēḷār*. The temples are usually on the outskirts of the village (this must be qualified as exceptions that are found both in the centre of villages and at some distance away)and on the edge of a tank (village pond) where water is stored. Water is perhaps the strongest symbol of life in all Indiaṇ thought—certainly for farmers engaged in wet-rice cultivation. Regardless of whether there is a wall or not, the ground around where the figures of village gods stand is sacred. Sandals must always be removed and proper respect shown. (My guide and village friends were meticulous about this. I would often, at their suggestion, "remove the chappals" forty or fifty feet from where figures stood isolated in the open.) This sacred area can extend to the areas where figures are made (see p.31).

There is a large tree or group of trees associated with a village temple in almost every case. In all of what is known of the cultural history of India, the tree has been a primary life and fertility symbol. Iconographically, few symbols were so well developed in both early folk and classical art styles. The Harappan and Mohenjo-daro seals, the yaksha/yakshi cult, the Bo tree of Buddhism, and the concept of the forest as a holy place and the abode of sages and holy men as popularized in Indian literature and folk traditions have all contributed to a strong connection between the tree and god in popular conception[1]. In Madurai District, the *Ālamaram* (ஆலமரம்), "banyan," and the *Puḷiyamaram* (புளிய மரம்), "tamarind," are very popular around temples although all the varieties of large shade trees are found. Most temples have a large tree growing within the walls and frequently flowering bushes and trees grow on the walls and around the figures. Some village temples consist of nothing more than a single large tree with figures placed beneath it.

Village Festivals

By "village festivals," I mean those festivals directly associated with the village temples and village gods. There are many festivals held in villages which remain unrecorded. Thus by giving accounts of only three types of festivals in such a limited area, I can

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1. **An unusual and fascinating study of this subject through the art of ancient Sanchi and Amaravati was made by J. Furgusson in 1868.**

only hope that the reader will be left with some impression of the organized relationships between village people and their gods. It will become evident that although I have used the word "worship" to describe this relationship it is actually much more broad and complex.

The first type of festival to be described is very important to the whole village and the relationships among panchayat leader, *pūcāri*, and others. This is the renewal of the mud figures of the gods in the village temple, an occasion usually named after the chief god of the particular temple in which the renewal is taking place. It is a time for people to commission small offerings to be placed with the new figures of the gods at their installation and a time for old concerns to be dropped and new ones attended to. Most of all, it is a time for village people to make special contact with their gods after a long interval and, for many, to relax and have a good time.

The festival really begins when the village leaders meet and decide that the time is right. This happens once every two or three years at most temples. Most village temples have a traditional interval between times of renewing their gods however, as shall be explained, the actual regularity of festivals is severely modified by other factors. After a decision to hold a festival has been taken (or with some prospect of a festival in mind), approval of the god most directly concerned is often sought before a date is chosen. In some cases, village people will gather in the temple at a certain time (Tuesdays and Fridays are popular for such functions in the Madurai area) and wait to hear a *Kauḷi* (கௌளி), lizard call from a tall palmyra palm, this being the indication of the god's approval. In other cases the *pūcāri* may have a dream during which the god appears or gives some indication of his will with regard to a festival. I have been told that this dream is often "checked" by a necessary co-incidental dream of someone else possibly to discourage a *pūcāri* from "dreaming up" too many festivals, to his economic advantage. In the case of animal sacrifice, some indication of the god's acceptance of the offering is sometimes sought before the sacrifice takes place. This may take the form of a sacrificial goat tossing its head, indicating the god's approval. These are only a

few examples of festival preparations which vary according to local tradition.

The leaders of village Pāppākuṭi had decided to renew the figures of gods in their Cōṉaiyā (சோணையா) temple (photo 58) as well as in two other Pāppākuṭi temples after only a year. The customary frequency was once every "one or two years." The *pūcāri* of the main temple and other *vēḷārs* who make the mud figures live in the neighbouring village of Ārappāḷaiyam and thus had first to be notified of the requirements. The work was done in the *vēḷār's* homes in Ārappāḷaiyam(actually in two homes adjoining one another), one with a very large covered porch and an immense courtyard suitable for making large figures.

By three o'clock in the afternoon of the day of the festival, the mud figures were only just completed and the *pūcāri* and his assistants were hard at work preparing them to be carried four miles to Pāppākuṭi. There were fifteen figures to be included in the procession. A small *Kaṉṉimār* (p. 52), one small *Aiyaṉār* "group" (p. 51), one small horse and bull (p. 56), three *pātams* (p. 57), and two *paṭṭavīraṉs* had only to be dressed in small sari-like cloths. Three large horse figures (two with small *Aiyaṉār* figures riding) and one large bull were each padded on the sides with bundles of straw and fixed, using elaborate rope knotting (photos 20, 21). With six or seven *vēḷārs* working, the two life-size figures of *Cōṉaiyā* and *Karuppucāmy* were tied into palanquin-type wooden chairs well padded with straw (photo 20).

All the figures were now in the large courtyard and excitement was mounting. During these final preparations, the village leader from Pāppākuṭi had arrived and had begun giving orders. His people were paying for the festival and he seemed to be expected to take charge. Pāppākuṭi villagers were joining the locals in the street outside the *vēḷār's* main courtyard and the hired drummers were warming up. The hired dancers, who had been dressing and making up at another *vēḷār's* house began a *Karakam* (கரகம்), a local folk dance done with a pot balanced on the head. The dancers included a woman, a clown, and two beautiful transvestites, a very well known Madurai group called "Rajrani." They

had brought with them two drummers playing *mirutaṅkam* (மிருதங்கம்), the Tamil double-headed drum, and two others playing *nātasvaram* (நாதஸ்வரம்), a clarinet-like horn. The dancers included very erotic movements in their dances. Many of these I had never seen in similar *karakams* on the city streets. Two policemen circulated through the throng. I was assured that this "bandobust" (a word used in India for police presence at any affair) was to stop people from "beating each other with sticks after smoking ganja and drinking arrack" (marijuana and palm liquor). Fortunately, although many people were drunk, the police were not called upon except to enjoy the festivities.

At six o'clock in the evening the life-size god figures were dressed in shining gold and scarlet *talaipākai*(தலைப்பாகை) turbans, *vēsṭis* (வேஷ்டி) (Tamil men's lower body cloth), and *tuṇḍū* (துண்டு) scarf (photo 60) and the large horse and bull figures were dressed in sari – like cloths. The twilight scene was by this time lit with kerosene pressure lamps mounted on tall poles. These were carried by men and women hired for the occasion and would light the procession to Pāppākuṭi. When the dressing was complete, the village leader and the *pūcāris* gathered in front of the figure of Cōṇaiyā and a cock was killed and its blood dripped about. As the cock was killed, a bell was rung. The bell, *maṇi* (மணி), is an important symbol in village worship; some village temples consist only of a collection of bells to "call" the god and attract his attention to the worship taking place. From this point in the program things moved very quickly. Many rituals similar to regular *pūja* in Brahmanical temples were performed: mantras were chanted, incense burnt, *cūṭam* (சூடம்), camphor (also called *karpūram* (கற்பூரம்) lit, and holy ash *vipūti* (விபூதி), distributed. Coconuts were broken and plantains offered. At a signal, the figures were lifted and the procession began with skyrockets exploding overhead. This was the emotional climax of the festival. The people jumped with raised arms in a moment of transporting joy.

Each of the small figures was carried by a single man, his head cushioned by a straw nest Each large animal figure was carried by four men supported by poles carried on their shoulders.

The large figures of the gods led the way, each carried on the shoulders of atleast thirty men In this way the procession followed the drummers and dancers down the village street toward pāppākuṭi.

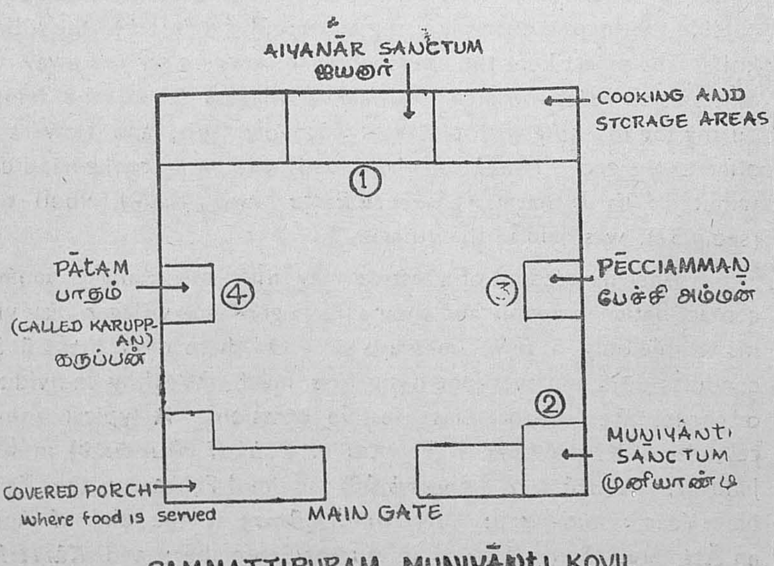
On arrival at Pāppākuṭi the figures were first taken to the village square where the people came during the night, some brought offerings of grain that would eventually go to the *pūcāri* Between two and four o'clock in the morning, the new figures were distributed among the three local temples. The small *Aiyaṉār* group and one large horse were taken to the *Iruḷappacāmi* (இருளப்பசாமி) temple, the small horse and bull, two large horses and the Paṭṭa-*vīraṉs* to the small *Aiyaṉār* temple,and the three *Pātams*, the large bull, and the two large figures of Cōṇ*aiyā* and *Karuppu* to the main Cōṇ*aiyā* temple. There the *pūcāris* (especially the head *pūcāri* and his brother) rearranged the figures, moving back the old to make room for the new and offering *pūja* for local people. After dawn, six goats were sacrificed in succession by various supporters of Cōṇ*aiyā* and his temple. The *pūcāri* decapitated these goats just outside the temple doorway using an *arivā*ḷ (அரிவாள்), the village knife. The priest kept the heads while the owners carried away the carcasses on poles. A steady stream of villagers visited the temple during the morning with plates of coconut, fruit, and flowers to offer to the god. *Prasātam* (holy food) was being cooked and distributed. Later that day an *erutu kaṭṭu* (எருது கட்டு), "bull tie" (see p.32), was held in the village.

Another account of a festival may illustrate a more common contact between people and their village gods. A villager may visit his temple only a few times a year. On these days the *pūcāri* conducts *pūja* and everyone has a fine meal. Wealthy individuals or groups often support these festive occasions. A typical annual calendar of festival days might include: *Poṅkal* (பொங்கல்) in mid-January; *Çivarāttiri* (சிவராத்திரி) in mid-February; the Tamil New Year in mid-April; *Cittirai* (சித்திரை) at the end of April; an Āṭi (ஆடி) month festival in August/September; and *Kārttikai* (கார்த்திகை) at the end of November. Most village temples are thus locked and deserted for most of the year (notable exceptions

are a few large temples near the city that are usually open, the *pūcāris* attending daily to the heavily, "Brahmanized" needs of the gods there). In some cases a simple *pūja* is conducted each Friday, the day of most active worship in the city.

The festival I will describe took place at the *Muṉiyāṇṭi* temple of *Cammaṭṭipuram*. At this temple simple *pūjās* are conducted most Fridays and festivals are held on the average of ten times a year. This festival was, however, an exception ordered and arranged at short notice by the *pūcāri* for an *ampalakārar* who had some land dealings with the temple. Because of the private dealings involved, I didn't learn the exact reason why the visitor paid for the festival. The local people joined in enthusiastically.

The layout of the temple and details of the *pūja* are fairly typical of Brahmanized village temples in the area. A simple sketch map of the temple will help the reader to follow the description



SAMMAṬṬIPURAM MUNIYĀṆṬI KOVIL
சம்மட்டிபுரம் முனியாண்டி கோவில்

I came to this temple on the *pūjā* day with the head *pūcāri*, a prominent *vēḷār* active in the *Kulālar* Association(for caste welfare). Three other *pūcāris* were already making preparations when we arrived : cooking, cutting coconuts and arranging trays and lamps. Four young boys (aged twelve to sixteen years) dressed in dhotis and wearing beads and sandalwood paste stripes of a priest were assisting in arranging flowers and other important offerings at the four important stations within the temple. The head *pūcāri* went into the small storeroom, removed his shirt, and changed from his Tamil-style *vēsṭi* to a North Indian (and temple Brahmin style) dhoti. He spread sandalwood paste on his shoulders, chest, and forehead in the horizontal Śaivite manner and put on a large string of Śaivite beads, While he was preparing, villagers were slowly entering the temple. most taking positions on the inside front porch.

The *pūjā* began with the *pūcāri* chanting Sanskrit mantras before the *Muṉiyāṇṭi* shrine and scattering rose petals at the feet of the god. A small boy holding a tray was attending. Shortly after a *pūcāri* spread some prasadam on banana leaves (the sweet pongal, see below) in front of each of the four gods. A second *pūcāri*, ringing a bell and accompanied by a smoking tray of *cūṭam*, sprinkled holy water on each of the gods' holy food (the order in which this was done is indicated in the diagram). The head *pūcāri* then made a similar round holding a five-flamed lamp, waving it in front of each god and whispering mantras. (These mantras are in Sanskrit and are known only to the *pūcāris* who are reluctant to discuss them.) An attendant followed the *pūcāri* on this round, carrying a tray on which was *vipūti*, sandalwood paste, and *kuṅkumam* (குங்குமம்), vermillion powder. This the *pūcāri* distributed to the people, applying paste directly to the foreheads of the men and babies, and handing it to the women. He likewise gave ash and powder. A *pūcāri* smashed a coconut on the threshold or doorway slab of the temple, children scrambled for the pieces, and everyone prepared to eat.

The *pūcāris* distributed banana leaves (the everyday plate in Tamil Nadu) to about fifty people seated on the inside front porch and the temple gates were closed to keep out stragglers. A very

fine meal was served, the honour of service being given to the *ampalakārar* who supported the festival. First, three kinds of *poṅkal*(பொங்கல்) (the festival rice dish of Tamil Nadu) were served: the common sweet pongal made with country brown sugar, cashewnut rice and lemon rice—all served in abundant quantities. Chicken curry was offered to the special guests. This had been made from chicken sacrificed earlier to ***Muṉiyāṇṭi***. As with many details of actual "village Hinduism" when compared with textbook accounts or popular urban conceptions, the serving of chicken stew as prasadam or holy food may seem in direct contradiction to the well known Hindu religious ideals of vegetarianism. Chicken is, however, in this case a great treat.

The entire festival was marked by extreme informality among the participants. People talked freely and children wandered around. A young man wheeled his cycle right into the temple during the *pūjā* and parked it against an inside wall, seemingly unnoticed by anyone. About an hour and a half after arriving at the temple, the *pūcāri* and I were back on the bus to Madurai, he a civilian in a *vēṣṭi* again.

I was able to see only the preparations for a third type of festival which must be included in this discussion. This "horse festival" is actually a more elaborate form of the first type of festival described. It involves the replacing of mud figures in the village temple but it also involves many more figures than usual and these are predominantly horses and bulls.

I visited few temples whose recent tradition included elaborate horse festivals. Of these, one had not had one for ten years and there seemed no prospect of another. Another was preparing for the first horse festival in ten years. In valaiyapaṭṭi, a village close to a mountain temple, a long shed of bamboo and coco-thatch had been constructed in a fallow field (photo 22). There, upto twelve *vēḷārs* worked daily, making mud figures for a great festival. I made two visits to this place, two weeks apart. Fifty full-size horse figures had already been modelled and were drying in the shed (several weeks work at least) by my first visit. The second time I came, only days before my departure from South India, fifty more

horses and bulls had been added to these as well as a great numbe of smaller figures At this time, firing of some of the figures was in progress but considerable work remained in firing, assembling and painting (some of these procedures will be explained in the section on techniques) The date on which the figures were to be taken to the village temple (the date of the festival itself) was at this time characteristically vague. I had come the second time on the day which, two weeks earlier, was considered likely as the festival day. Typically, several dates are proposed for any village function one may inquire about in advance. This is often a polite form of admission that no one knows for the sure or that no date has been set. This is understandable, especially if the enquiry is made any distance from the actual village involved. A temple such as the one for which this festival was being arranged is semi-mythical to people living only ten miles away. Few have seen it; most would have heard of it only through gossip.

This festival preparation was the only occasion on which I saw *vēḷārs* working for a "wage," in this case, a flat rate of four or five rupees a day. They were all from a village near Valaiyapaṭṭi which is the traditional home of *vēḷārs* making figures for the temple (although in this case the *pūcāri* lives in Valaiyapaṭṭi itself). Because of the work in progress, the area in the vicinity of the workshed was sacred and subject to the same conditions as a temple itself (in regard to removal of shoes etc.).

Special events sometimes held in conjuction with village festivals can only be referred to in passing, as I was personally able to witness very few. At the outset it may be noted that important life events such as the ear-boring ceremony for children, marriage, and many others often take place or have some part performed at the temple, and may be planned to coincide with a festive occasion. One relatively common event, mentioned in connection with the *Cōṇaiyā* festival, is the *erutu kaṭṭu* (எருது கட்டு), "bull tie," a variation of the better known *jalli kaṭṭu* (ஜல்லி கட்டு) which is held annually in a few big towns in Madurai District (notably in Alaṅgānallūr). The *jalli kaṭṭu* is very similar to the "running of the bulls" of Pampalona, Spain. Young men demonstrate their bravery and skill by running

with, dodging and tackling bulls running down a street lined with carts. The *erutu kaṭṭu* is usually held on the open village square the day after a festival has been held. A great bull is tied about the neck with a long and very thick rope (often eight to ten inches thick) which trails behind the bull as he charges back and forth. The young men tease the bull untill he turns on them and try to grab the rope and show bravery. Naturally the bull sometimes charges the crowd and ghastly injuries are common, although borne with remarkable stoicism. The great rope is afterward hung in a large tree, usually near the village temple.

"Firewalking," walking barefoot over a bed of hot coals under the protection of a god (and usually in a state of trance) accompanies some festivals, notably *pālkuṭam* (பால்குடம்), "milk pot," village festivals. One morning my guide Muthusamy and I met a rickshaw driver of our acquaintance at a village bus stop. I was horrified to see his arms and knees terribly burned, severely limiting any movement he made. He explained that he had fallen while walking on the coals and realized that he had thus been "punished by the *cāmi*." His explanation was that now he was only relieved that his punishment had been administered and that he was now free from sin.

It seems that festivals generate a spirit among village people that often becomes conducive to magical and miraculous occurrences. An example of how a miracle can itself inspire a festival is told by people of *Kōccaṭai* (whose beautiful *Muttaiyā* temple has been photographed for a Tamil Nadu State tourist poster). As the result of a dream a stranger from Singapore flew to India, at a reported cost of "six thousand rupees," just to present a silk dress to the god.

Before leaving the discussion of village festivals I wish to mention two very important factors which modify the regularity and extravagance of village functions. Some of the important implications of these factors for the future of village art and religion will be considered at the conclusion of this paper. The first is the economic situation. Regardless of the traditional calendar of festivals in a particular village, the actual frequency and nature of festival events are tied directly to someone's or some groups

ability to pay for them. In very hard times, under any number of local circumstances, a "regular" festival may be postponed or simply not arranged. New economic priorities eclipse old ones. It may be suggested that the same difficult times (brought on by crop failure, for instance) often call for intensified religious activity to appease or appeal to the gods. However I saw little evidence of this view in the villages I visited.

The second factor influencing festivals is village politics. By this I refer to factions which are a steady influence on the lives of village people of Tamil Nadu. Political parties are sometimes the source of factions within the village, often intensifying long-standing caste and lineage rivalries. Village leaders are often strongly divided along party or factional lines. In many cases, "party feeling" was the quietly explained reason for a deserted temple; that is, the particular temple or even god was out of favour with the group currently in power in the village. It seems that factions have used promises or assurances of particular festivals to increase or to maintain their power.

III. The work of the Vēḷār : Technique and Style

Technique :

The work of the *vēḷār* for the village temple can be divided into three main categories : massive "permanent" figures of mounted heros and demons, life-size figures of the gods and their mounts, and small figures of gods and offerings. The museum collection consists only of small figures (the third category). Before dealing with these and how they are made, I wish to briefly introduce the large figures and to list some special techniques involved in their creation.

The most distinguishing feature of most village temples in Madurai District is their massive figures of the mounted hero, usually the protector and chief god of the temple, and/or a great ferocious *pūtam* (பூதம் or "demon" figure related to the Sanskrit *bhūta*) (photos 23–26). These figures are not worshipped but stand as permanent semi-architectural features of the temple. They are somewhat exceptional among village art because they are not, except in a few rare cases, made of mud. The vēḷārs, nevertheless, build these figures in accordance with their artistic skill and religious responsibilities (there are cases of artistically gifted individuals from other groups (e g. Naidus) participating in this work). The work of building massive figures requires special skills and the *vēḷārs* who do them form a special sub-group of artists.

The foundations of massive figures are appropriately large bases of brick (often twelve feet on a side and six feet high) and are plastered over. In some recently made figures cement is used.

Upon this base a frame is built consisting of a core of bricks into which is fixed a skeleton of wooden pieces and iron rods bolted and bent to the desired shape. The rods from the core of all extending parts of a figure : e.g. horse's head, legs, tail or *pūtam's* raised arm. In old massive figures one can see the frame protruding where the covering has fallen away (photo 27). The half-relief and free-standing "side figures" seen on the bases of massive mounted figures (photos 28, 29) are built in a similar way. Over the framework is applied a layer of plaster in accordance with the shape of the figure. Surface detail is worked into this layer. The plaster consists of a mixture of *cuṇṇāmpu* (சுண்ணாம்பு), lime, *maṇal* (மணல்), sand, and *Paṉaṅkaruppaṭṭi* (பனங்கருப்பட்டி), palmyra palm essences. In recent times, commerical cement and plaster have been used as well. These long lasting materials permit the massive figures to be renovated from time to time rather than replaced as the smaller mud figures. Ancient massive figures, some dating from before the turn of the century, are the oldest examples of the *vēḷār's* art which exist.

Among the massive figures to be seen in villages around Madurai, there are a few that are made of mud rather than plaster or have the upper portions made of mud (photos 30, 31, 32). These are surely among the largest and most impressive creations in mud to be seen anywhere in the world. All the figures of this type known to me are fashioned in the oldest village styles now in existence and may be remnants of a time, before the advent of plaster and cement, when mud was commonly used for making massive figures. Mud figures are often covered with a thin layer of plaster that protects the mud and allows renovation. Much of the knowledge of making these figures has apparently been lost. I spoke to very few *vēḷārs* who had ever seen one built and none who had worked on one Like more common large mud horse figures, these massive figures were modelled on the spot and probably fired in temporary kiln enclosures within the temple (Bussabarger and Robins 1968: 19).

On the oldest massive figures of all types, can be seen traces

of the pastel shades of tempura paints (now commonly called *pavuṭar kalar* (பவுடர் கலர்), "powder colour"; a mixture of egg, tree gum (from the pod of the ***karuvai maram*** (கருவை மரம்), pigment and usually a binding material like linseed oil. Most old examples are, however, in a state of decay in which all trace of colour has vanished. New and restored figures are usually painted with enamel based paints (when it can be afforded) in shades running from silver to hot pink.

The second category of the *vēḷār's* work, life-size figures of village gods and their mounts, are in keeping with their sacred purpose. They are the most detailed, finely finished, and formal of the *vēḷār's* works (photos 33, 34). The size of the larger figures, often five feet tall, dictates some special procedures. The main difficulty lies in assembling large mud figures, as this must be done in stages. In making a large horse, for example, the legs must first be modelled and left to dry until they have some strength. The body is then fitted and often suspended with ropes from the rafters of a shed or temple building until strong enough to stand alone (photo 35). The head and rider, if any, may be added later. A human-like figure is also created in stages, using props to hold newly added parts until they have dried and become part of the whole. In many figures an additional strut of clay is incorporated into the finished form, holding a raised arm (e.g. from hip to elbow) or supporting a figure up the back (photo 36). Most large mud figures are fired in their completed form, however the bodies and heads of horse figures are sometimes fired separately and joined after.

In order to introduce the third category of the *vēḷār's* work (the small figures and offerings left at village temples), the procedure followed in their creation will be described.

It is the firm conviction of some *vēḷār's* with whom I spoke that the skill as well as the inspiration behind mud modelling comes directly from the gods. It may be sufficient to add that a good part of skill is familiarity with materials and procedures. Most South Indian village children spend their younger years in the open places

of their homes and especially on the swept front porch area. In a *vēḷār* community this is where most of the work is done. As a festival requiring new figures approaches, the *vēḷār's* area and especially the *pūcāri's* home become a bustle of activity. Often two or three *vēḷārs* work together to meet a deadline. Thus by the time a boy begins to participate in his family's work he is familiar on a day to day basis with all the technical aspects. If his family are active *pūcāris*, he will have seen and will be familiar with the figures of gods and offerings that he will eventually be called upon to create himself.

The creation of any mud figure, as well as common pots etc., begins with the gathering and mixing of the modelling mud itself. The main ingredient is *vaṇṭal* (வண்டல்), "river mud", to which is added various proportions of *Kaḷimaṇ* (களிமண்), "clay" and *maṇal* (மணல்), "sand." Proportions cannot be given because these vary considerably according to the personal preference of the *vēḷār* and the availability and quality of these materials. A special ingredient of some modelling muds is *yāṉai latti* (யானை லத்தி) or elephant dung. The raw materials are kept in a mound or lump in the *vēḷār's* courtyard and are usually found against a wall covered with a damp sackcloth. The newly gathered mud usually sits for several days in this state before use. When the *vēḷār* begins work, he digs out of the mound as much mud as he will need and mixes it thoroughly, usually with his feet (photos 37, 38).

The vēḷār prepares a work surface by sprinkling sand about (on a board or flat piece of ground) and on this rolls out a ball of mud (photos 39, 40). The tools of the *vēḷār* consist of a pot of water to keep the mud soft and to seal joints and a modelling tool, *mūṅkil kallu kucci* (மூங்கில் கல்லுக்குச்சி), "bamboo pinch stick" of various sizes ranging from six inches to ten inches long and about a quarter of an inch thick. This tool is simply a piece of bamboo cut to the desired shape and rubbed smooth on a cement floor or wall. A more commercial modelling tool is a miniature version of a mason's tool, *kottaṉār karaṇṭi* (கொத்தனார் கரண்டி), that is occasionally used by some *vēḷārs*.

Most figures are begun in the same way. The mud is rolled

out into a long tube that is flattened and bent into a rectangular enclosure forming the base. Intersecting supports are added for strength before covering the base (photos 41, 42). Holes are left in the base of most figures for circulation of heat while firing and to allow poles or ropes to be inserted for carrying in procession to the village temple. In the case of horse and bull figures which have no base, holes for the same purposes are cut in the legs or body. When the base is complete, the lower parts of the figure itself start to take shape. The mud figures are always hollow, the thickness of the mud wall varying from 1/4 to 3/4 of an inch, according to the size of the figure (photos 43,44). The figure is modelled in stages, the newly formed mud left to dry somewhat before fine detail is added. The finished figure drys in the shade; the more slowly it drys, the less chance there is of cracking (photo 45).

The next step in the process of making a mud figure is a low temperature firing which, as all other work, is done in the courtyard of open area nearby. A layer of coconut husks, ***Kopparai*** **(கொப்பரை)**, is spread on a flat piece of ground and the figures to be fired are laid on top. More coconut husks are then packed around the figures (usually fired in a group) (photos 46,47) until they are completely covered. Next, the coconut husks are covered with paddy straw that is packed tightly with a long flat stick (photos 48,49). A layer of ash (usually salvaged from other firings) and a sprinkling of water are added in several alternate applications (photos 50,51). When lit, the paddy straw burns fiercely and soon heats the coconut husks to a red-hot temperature. The wet ash and the outer layer of straw act like a dome to keep the heat in and to hold the heap together. After forty-five minutes to an hour the fire burns out and half an hour after that one can, with the help of a leaf or piece of cloth, pick the figures out of the ash (photo 52).

After the figure has dried and has been fired cracks and joints are reinforced with a plaster mixture of lime, river mud, and palm juices. Before painting large figures are often coated with a lime solution which leaves an even white surface (photo 53). I have seen a layer of paddy dust added to an undercoat resulting in a slightly

abrasive surface on the finished figure (Object A). A dusting of powdered mica is occassionally added before firing to produce the same effect.

Both massive and life-size figures are today usually painted with bright enamel, favouring shades of orange, green, red and blue.

The use of metallic papers and other ornamental trimings are becoming popular. Most small figures are still painted in traditional tempura colour despite the availability of more convenient and colourful poster paint—the commercial products cost too much for most occasions (photos 54,55).

The active life of a mud figure in the village temple varies according to local tradition but can be as short as one year. Commonly important figures are replaced every two or three years, but many ritually less important figures are left at their places of honour until they literally fall apart. Those figures that have been replaced are put to one side, moved back against a wall, or if in very poor condition, put behind the sanctum (inside the wall) out of sight (photo 56). Because the figures are so fragile, arms and other projecting parts fall away quickly, within a few years if completely exposed to wether. It is rare to see mud figures older than twenty or thirty years. The small figures seldom last a year after they are made. The old pieces, through the forces of rain, insects, and small boys, fall apart and eventually melt back into the soil (photo 57).

Style

The styles and changes in style of the ***vēḷār's*** art are extremely complex and localized subjects. Because of the impermanent nature of mud figures and the lack of any recorded, it is difficult to speculate about the styles of this art even a century ago. The present discussion will serve its purpose if it introduces the flowing and changing nature of village art style. I have attempted only to extract some major trends and influences which have had and still have a widespread impact on the style of the *vēḷār's* work in Madurai District.

At the outset, some important characteristics of village art style become apparent when its products are compared to the classi-

cal religious art of the great Hindu temples It is evident that the village artist, the ***vēḷār***, has been constantly influenced by the motifs and styles of the "high art" of the cities just as the mythology, ritual and architecture of the village gods and their temples have incorporated and continue to emulate much of the Brahmanical tradition.[1] The classical styles have been locked in a tradition which encouraged limited personal expression from the individual "court" artist. It was the anonymous sculptor, working within a very strict and comprehensive set of refined rules and dimensions sanctioned by a royal patron, who raised south Indian temple art to its classical perfection and set stylistic standards which dominated the South for centuries at a time. Worked in wood, stone or metal, figures were permanent fixtures; relatively timeless, they are as appropriate now as a hundered years in the past or future

In contrast, the work of the ***vēḷār*** is much more closely tied to contemporary attitudes and tastes. New figures are made each year. Styles change quickly and locally. The ***vēḷār***, unlike his more specialized counterpart in classical art, uses, no diagrams or shastras; his proto-type is the flowing style of his family's tradition. The lack of strict standards or fixed models and the large number of artists at work may explain why a village god may be portrayed in completely differing styles by **vēḷārs** working for temples no more than a mile apart or, even more dramatically, how the style of sculpture in one village temple may change completely within a decade (photos 58–62).

In contrasting classical and village art styles another important feature must be considered. One dominant characteristic of South Indian (in fact, it can be argued, all Indian) classical art has been the "idealization" of the living form in an attempt to describe the divine. The classical Indian artist portrayed gods and heroes with mightly elongated arms, dēvis with tany waists and huge breasts; all with the smoothest of skin and the most serene of ex-

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1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the influence of local village styles on classical art although this influence is acknowledged. See Kramrisch 1968 : 50.

pression. Horses were furiously charging beasts, each muscle poised gracefully whereby exaggeration of mortal characteristics creates an immortal ideal. The *vēḷār*, on the other hand, more often tries to convey his impression (or that of his family tradition) of the "essential character" of a god or beast, rather than its idealized "natural form." Although certain standards, for example "what a horse should look like," exist among *vēḷārs*, widespread variations in basic shapes and decoration attest to various and changing ideals and methods of expressing them. Many village temples have among their collection of figures at least one example which, even considering the range of style, appears very odd. It seems that these are examples in which a *vēḷār* has, in his attempt to express his conception of a god or spirit, created something unique and stylistically bizzare (photo 63).

It must be noted that working in mud rather than stone, wood, metal, or other material presents certain conditions and possibilities to the *vēḷārs* which may have implications for understanding village art style. First, the *vēḷār* has unusual freedom of experimentation because if his progress does not satisfy him he can start from the beginning with the material. Secondly, as we have seen, the *vēḷār* is first of all a potter and the skill utilised in his work for the village temple is grounded in a familiarity with the medium developed through making pots. It is thus understandable that so many figures are slightly reminicent in form of the vessels that are the *vēḷār's* everyday concern. There are certain shapes to which mud conforms best and, as a master craftsman, the *vēḷār* instinctively makes use of these in his modelling work. Many details of representation that are sufficiently widespread to be called aspects of style (e.g. the feet projecting from a cylinder in the offerings for children, (see p. 56) and the bulging bodies of animal figures to name only two) can be explained as practical, an "elegant" means of expression in the medium of mud.

The *vēḷār's* work for the village temple is essentially an art "of the moment." Because of the inevitable perishability in the village environment of the materials used, we have no real basis for speculation on the historical development of the styles of contem-

porary village art even though the development surely reaches back into antiquity. There are however several phases of "recent" South Indian history which have made an impact and are evident in the style of mud figures in villages today.

Most prominent among these is the influence of the classical art styles. Part of the pattern of adoption of aspects of the "great tradition" through the cities has influenced all village religious life. As much today as for perhaps the last two thousand years, the *vēḷārs* deeply influenced by the art styles of the great kingdoms, Brahmanical tradition and urban taste. In many cases, motifs taken up by village art (e.g. the horse has become the vehicle of the village gods while there is evidence that the original vehicle was the elephant, p. 55) have introduced with them strong stylistic influence. One of the predominant local influences was transmitted through the *Nāyak* kings who ruled Madurai and the surrounding country from the middle of the sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth. Most of the village gods made today are still portrayed dressed in the clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry of the *Nāyak* kings, ladies, or warriors. The bold, almost aggressive, *Nāyak* style of sculpture has made an impact on village style that remains strong in contemporary work. Some local village temples have pieces of *Nāyak* or other classical style stone sculpture usually housed in a sanctum to serve as a source of inspiration to the *vēḷārs* who worship or conduct worship there. Relationships with the neighbouring state of Kerala have also been strong in village beliefs. The land "on the other side of the hills" is thought by many Tamils to be the home of wizards and sorcerers who frequently appear in the village stories of Madurai District. Some elements of village iconography can be traced to costumes of the Teyyam of Kerala.[1]

In some villages in Madurai District one can see the mounted village god or its side figures portrayed dressed in the uniforms of the army, police, or civil services of British India. The side figures sometimes represent a local historical figure who brought prestige to

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1 The village dance/drama is the precursor to the famous Kathakali dance style. See Kurup 1973.

the village through his association with the British "Raj" (photo 28) It may seem that this foreign influence is more one of motif than of style yet the ghastly realism which characterizes these figures suggests that perhaps the *vēḷâr* borrowed something from the style in which the British and those under their direct influence portrayed their heroes in huge commemorative portrait statues. That a village god like *Aiyaṉār* should be represented by a pink-faced, red-lipped captain in the British Indian army in a small isolated village (as is sometimes the case (photo 63) says something about both the extent of the British influence and the ability of village art style to adapt and change.

Anyone who comes to Tamil Nadu from outside the country and stays for any length of time will likely notice instances of the profound and still growing influence of the cinema on popular taste. Cinema music, colour, and ideals of beauty are reaching deeply into village life. An energetic group of actor/politicians dominates public life in the state. Their every statement, cause, and new outfit set a trend. As in the past, the *vēḷār's* art incorporates these new trends. The figures for the village temples are becoming round and smooth. The faces of the most recently constructed massive figures, pastey and wrinkle free, curiously resemble an M. G. Ramachandran or a Sivaji Ganeshan[1]. The colours of the cinema world, brilliant oranges, pinks, yellows and metallic colours, have become very popular. The cinema influence is making itself felt in another way as well. Some *vēḷār* artists have diversified and have taken jobs outside their traditional scope which require artistic ability. One *vēḷār* family group in *Ārappāḷaiyam* has three members working as artists in the cinema field (two modelling for big studios in Madras). The *vēḷārs* in this case use their sculptural skill to create the plaster embellishments for lavish film sets and for modern theater decoration. An increasing number of *vēḷârs* must look outside their traditional field to support themselves. If a *vēḷār*

1 These are two of the top actors in Tamil films who are absolutely beloved of the people. M.G.R. is the Chief Minister and also the leader of the ruling A.D.M.K. party and Sivaji is a hard working representative of the Congress (I) party.

returns to the village he naturally brings new ideas and influences with him. In the town of ***Alaṅkānallūr***, for example, a well known *vēḷār* created both the cinema-style figures for decoration of the local cinema house and the massive mounted figure of *Muṉiyāṇṭi* and his attendants for the local village temple down the street (photos 64, 65).

One of the most important stylistic developments of the last few decades has been the general movement from finely detailed modelling and bold characterization of the past toward the simpler, rounder, and more anonymous look of today. In some cases this has been a slow process of change over a major part of this century but in many places the appearance of the figures of gods in one temple has changed within a few years. The oldest figures of village gods and their mounts show very high relief modelling and elaborate surface detail (photo 33). Newer pieces have become simpler and more standardized in most cases. The penetrating gaze and "immediate recognition" experienced in looking at many old figures has been replaced by the empty stare and rigid stance of many of those recently made (photos 12-13, 8-59-60, 61-62).

Most of the historical influences mentioned above appear to have had and continue to have a greater impact on the style of massive and life-size figures of gods and their mounts than on the style of small figures and offerings. The horse and bull offerings of the village temples have retained a very bold style, seemingly little influenced by the classical styles and movements described. The older figures are indeed more detailed and show more work. Recently made examples, nevertheless, maintain a forcefullness and diversity of local style highlighted by imaginatively painted designs (photo 66).

The smallest examples of the *vēḷār's* work, the small figures of gods and offerings, seem to remain most firmly rooted in a local rural style and least related to anything seen outside the village temple. The images of animals, gods, mortals, and body parts often function as an individual's special plea or contract with a village god and their forms and shapes reflect the practicality, individuality, and immediacy of these purposes. I will try to introduce the style of the small figures through a review of the pieces in the museum collection.

IV. The Collection

The figures in this collection were made in February 1975 by K. Muthusamy, a *vēḷār* potter of Ārappāḷaiyam village, Madurai, with the exception of Object S which was made by a relative of Muthusamy two or three years ago.

All are made of fired mud (for the ingredients refer to p. 38). Objects D, G, and S are painted with tempura (p. 36) and all others are painted with poster paint.

Objects A through E are figures of gods; F, G, and H are mounts for the village protecting gods, and I through U are small offerings.

These figures are modelled in the modern style and reflect, to some extent, requirements and tastes of today. In terms of pure "aesthetics," many figures in the collection will compare rather poorly with the accompanying photos of similar figures under worship in village temples. It must be stressed that many of the finest mud figures are usually the oldest figures in the village temples and are the work of a generation of *vēḷārs* whose working life is past.

The first group consists of four images of the god *Aiyaṉār*. They have been included because *Aiyaṉar* is the most widespread and popular god in the villages of Madurai District and probably in rural South India. Aiyaṉār is also one of the few gods ever depicted in a form small enough to be included in this collection.

Most villages in Madurai District have an *Aiyaṉār* temple, usually shared with a group of other gods. *Aiyaṉār's* relationship

with the other village gods is somewhat problematic although usually characterized by "superiority and aloofness."[1]

The current and popular myth of *Aiyaṉār*'s birth links him strongly with the Brahmanical tradition. He is the son of the union between Śiva and Viṣṇu as Mōhini, a form taken by Viṣṇu to seduce Śiva and defeat the demon Asura. This myth is illustrated on many of the "side figures" of the massive mounted *Aiyaṉār* figures. In many images, Aiyanār is depicted with the Śaivaite mark on his forehead (as *Karuppucāmi* is often depicted with the mark of Viṣṇu). *Aiyaṉār* is definitely the most Brahmanized of popular village gods and seems to have played some part in urban worship as well. He is depicted in Chola bronzes (p.23) and can occasionally be seen in the colourful devotional pictures with which many Hindus decorate their homes and shops. He is the only great hero of the villages who stands aloof from such village traditions as blood sacrifice.

Today *Aiyaṉār* is, nevertheless, essentially a village god, local to South India (unknown north of the *Kotāvari* River) and seldom seen in any purely Brahmanical temple.[2] It is my opinion that, like other village gods, *Aiyaṉār* was originally a local figure who over centuries has taken on the ritual and iconographical justifications and characteristics of the cities and the kingdoms. It is hardly surprising that the most powerful and important of village gods should earn the designation of "son of Śiva" in an area where Śaivism grew and flourished for so many centuries.

Aiyaṉār is primarily a protector of the village. He rides around the village at night fighting endless battles with evil intruders. For this purpose he is the god most often depicted mounted and the mud horses and bulls offered at village festivals are most often for his benefit. He also appears in the sanctum of village temples as the main recipient of *pūja*.

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1 See Dumont 1970 for a full discussion of this subject.

2 One notable exception is the famous temple and pilgrimage centre of Lord Ayyappan, (Aiyaṉār) in the Sabari Hills of Kerala State. This is the centre of Brahmanized worships of this god where he is also called Sasta or Hariharaputra. See Ayyappan 1973.

Object A : ***Aiynār*** (ஐயனார்),

Object A (unfortunately no photo is available) represents the most modern sty'e of village art and perhaps the style toward which most village modelling is moving. This is *Aiyaṉār* as the Lord, slated in the posture of "kingly ease" suitable for installation in a sanctum of a village temple. The iconographical details will be outlined in the note on Object B. a similar figure. What is important in this figure is the fine modelling and attention to dimension and purely visual effect. The style is the remains of the classical styles fused into the popular idiom of religious and, to some extent, secular art of South India today. This style is popular in the representation of the Brahmanical gods in endless calendar drawings, in images for festival and popular worship and also in advertising and the cinema. As little of the grace of the classical styles remains in the hanging hand and the erect carriage. The artist's use of small pellets of clay is very effiective in depicting jewelry.

This figure has been fired and lightly coated with a shellac and a fine coat of paddy dust, accounting for the abrasive feel of the surface. It is left unpainted to better show the modelling technique.

Object B*: *Aiyaṉār*: *Photo 67

The staring eyes, thick lips, and somewhat more freely formed figure of Object B indicate that this is a more authentically village style than the one just discussed. From the outset it must be noted that the dress and decoration of this figure is that of a holy man. The Śaivite stripes on forehead and body are those of a priest or renunciant. The hair is dressed in the style of the great *Sannyāsis* or *aṇṭis* with matted locks tied up, in this case with a diadem, and with ringlets hanging freely (e.g. see *Muṉiyāṇṭi* or *Mañcamalai* Āṇṭi). It must also be noted that one of the common attributes of *Aiyāṉar* in the urban representation is the "Meditation band" around the knees associating him with yoga, renunciation and the life of a holy man. This conception of *Aiyaṉār* contrasts strikingly with his more widely known form of the great warrior guarding the village and temple for all to see, only one of the apparent contradictions that makes characterizations of this god so difficult. In Object B,

Aiyaṉār wears a traditional kingly garment (a type of dhoti) and appropriate jewelry. *Aiyaṉār* invariably carries only one weapon which in most village figures looks like a large nodle. Dumont has identified this as a "septre or whip" (Dumont 1970: 22) but I believe it is the elephant goad (Sk. ankuśa). This is consistent with the indications that *Aiyaṉār's* original vehicle (before the horse became the kingly animal and *Aiyaṉār's* association with Śiva and the bull) was the elephant. There is ample evidence of this in the oldest clay and stone figures and in the earliest trends in South Indian art generally.

Object C: Aiyaṉār: Photo 68

Object C is a small figure made to be placed on a small mud horse or bull. This is *Aiyaṉār* the warrior and the differences with Object B are apparent. The hair is cropped short or put up in the helmet/crown. In this representation he wears a small mark of Viṣṇu and a small jacket and dhoti complete the costume. The warrior *Aiyaṉār* most often carries the elephant goad as well (although I have seen massive mounted *Aiyaṉār* figures armed with rifles and revolvers). The thin line running diagonally across the body of Object C is a sacred thread, indicating high birth.

Object D: Aiyaṉār, with Puskalā Tēvi (புஷ்கலா தேவி) *and Pūrṇā Tēvi*(பூர்ணா தேவி): *photo 69*

Object D illustrates another aspect of the Lord *Aiyaṉār*, that of the Lord and his consorts. This trio, popular images in the sanctums of village temples, is almost surely the direct influence of the Brahmanical tradition and the "Śakti" concept. *Puskalā Dēvi* and *Pūrṉa Dēvi* are names that come from Telengana (Modern Andhra Pradesh) as do many names of village gods in Madurai District through the long influence of the *Nāyaks* who originated from that area. In other areas of Tamil Nadu, *Aiyaṉār's* consorts take other names. They seem to have little power of their own and are only there to serve the Lord and, in fact, the village people have some difficulty explaining their presence at all. *Aiyaṉār* is thought of as a "bachelor" by most, definitely not a family man with his warlike and priestly duties. As has been noted before, there is very little

conception of a pantheon or a cosmology in village worship. The families of the gods so beloved in Brahmanical worship never appear in the village temples and it seems that ***Aiyaṉār's*** "family" is a relatively recent import from the cities.

All three figures in Object D wear elaborate crowns, the ancient high crown of South India. All wear heavy necklaces. The *Dēvis* wear breastbands, a popular ancient form of attire among court women. ***Aiyaṉār*** wears his hair long and two unusual pieces of jewelry: a ring/bracelet unit and a pair of rigid anklets. The *Dēvi* each hold a lotus. ***Aiyaṉār's*** goad has broken off in the firing.

Photos 32,20,15 illustrate the diverse forms of the *Aiyaṉār* figure in massive mounted form, in large mud figures, and in stone. Photos 70 through 73 show examples of small mud figures in village temples.

Object E*: *Kaṉṉimār* (கன்னிமார் *or virgins*: *Kaṉṉi*, "*virgin*", *and mār*' "*honourable*" — *suffix*): *photo 74

A popular secondary god in Madurai District, ***Kaṉṉimār*** is not found in its own temple but among the host of "attendant" gods. The origin of the iconography is obscure though there is perhaps some distant connection with the "sapta-matṛkas" (Sk. seven mothers) of the Brahmanical tradition. One form of sapta–matṛkas is "kumari," the power of youth, that appears consistent with the prevailing feeling about *Kaṉṉimār*. There may also be some connection with the *Kārttikai peṇgaḷ* (கார்த்திகை பெண்கள்), the women (virgins) who attended *Murukaṉ* (முருகன்) (the most popular Brahmanical god of Tamil Nadu) at Saravanan tank, his birthplace. Although there were only six of these women, they can be worshipped with *Murukaṉ* as the seven stars in the constellation Pliedies. This is a common association made by village people. Whitehead speaks of the "seven sisters of Śiva" (Whitehead 1921: 29) and makes the association with *Māriyammaṉ*, a god called ***Kaṉṉiammaṉ***, who protects against smallpox in association with her seven brothers in South Arcot District and who protects fishermen and their families in Tirunelveli District. Dumont' who writes of the Seven Mothers (Dumont 1970 : 22) and Kramrisch, who writes of the Seven Virgins, (Kramrisch 1968 : 57) would probably have to agree with Elmore, who writes of the Seven

Sisters (Elmore 1915 : 59) when he suggests that the legends of this god "while no doubt originally similar to those relating to other Dravidian Gods, have become so much connected to Hindu legends" as to be recognisable in standard Hindu mythology.

As in the case of most active and popular gods of Madurai District, *Kaṉṉimār* is consulted in various Important matters. *Kaṉṉimār's* ability to guard the village itself from evil is noted by whitehead (1921:32). More important in Madurai District is *Kaṉṉimār's* power over life and death, an ability to intercede in cases of childbirth and in serious illnesses especially those of children. The figures of *Kaṉṉimār* are usually installed to one side or at the back of a village temple. These figures are often replaced, with other secondary figures, at the time of a major festival of the temple.

In considering this particular figure we may note features that are characteristic of most *Kaṉṉimār* figures wherever they appear. The figure is conceptualized and manifested as a unit, as seven figures acting as one. The small cap-like headpieces of the figures are a common village style representation of the court hairdressing of the *Nāyak* period (involving a large knot offset to one side of the head). The cosmetic beauty spot on the forehead emphasises the maidenly aspect of the *Kaṉṉimār*. The bulging "fish eyes" are a symbol of divine and of power in village art generally. Each figure wears a "jewel" around her neck. The ears are elongated and are a symbol of royalty and power (i e. wearing heavy earrings and jewels) although the earrings are not shown in this figure. Each individual holds a lotus in one hand except the second from the left who, through some confusion, has both hands in the lap and the second from the right, who lost an arm in the firing. The costume worn by the *Kaṉṉimār* are the village style representation of obsolete styles of the ancient kingdoms (a short tunic and long skirt).

The strong "folk" character of this and most other *Kaṉṉimār* figures is evident in the "pelleted" eyes, pinched nose, and incised details characteristic of mud modelling in India at least since Harappan times (second millenium B.C.).[1]

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1. **A very readable group of essays on this subject containing excellent photographs is the "Terricottas" number of Marg 1969,**

Photos 75-77 show *Kaṉṉimār* figures under worship in village temples. Photo 75, a figure from a temple very near Ārappāḷaiyam, shows a great similarity to the figure in the collection, Photo 76 is a figure which makes good use of incising to bring out the ferocity of of *Kaṉṉimar*, especially on the mouth. These figures at one time held lotus blossoms in their hands but now most are broken. The last example of a *Kaṉṉimār* figure (photo 77) is an uncommonly beatiful example. The skirts of the individual figures are differentiated by a subtle overlapping fold and the headpices are integrated with the back support. Note that rather than holding a lotus each individual has a hand on the shoulder of the next.

Object F: Kutirai* (குதிரை) *horse, photo 78

Object F, as well as Objects G and H, are offerings made to the great *cāmis* at the village temples. These are the mounts which the gods ride while protecting the village. In Madurai District, these mounts are offered at festival time, often five or six at a time and occasionally in even greater numbers.

The horse is today by far the most common mount of the village gods yet the horse is not indigenous to the area and has never been commonly used. It remains a semi-mythical animal to most village people. The reverence for this animal and its close association to the gods may possibly be explained through some historical trends. The first of these may date back to the Aryan migration to India (Second millenium B.C.) and its subsequent influence on much of Indian religion and thought. The Aryans were a horse breeding people and their mounted mobility and power probably enabled them to dominate the local people with whom they came in contact. From the Aryan times the horse has been associated both with great heroes and with the gods. The horse became an especially strong symbol in tribal and village art styles of India.[1]

A second and more local historical trend that may have contributed to the popularity of the horse as the vehicle of village gods in Madurai District was the association of the horse with the Pandyan kings. The Pandyans were the most ancient line of kings ruling the

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1 **This role is disscused in some detail by Kramrish 1968: 56-8.**

Madurai region for which reliable historical record exists today. From as early as the third century B. C. according to some sources[1] and surely for six or seven centuries before the conquest of South India by the Cholas in the tenth century A. D., the Pandyans controlled the "deep south." Sometime early in the first millenium A. D. the Arab traders introduced the horse to the Pandyans through the ports on the Coromandel coast. This amazing beast became much sought after by royalty and commanded fabulous prices. (One story relates that the business-wise Arabs neglected to tell their native customers that horses must be shod. The Pandyans thus rode them until their hooves wore down and they died and then bought others.) The horse was thus, from very early times, an animal of the king and his warriors, the vehicle of the mighty.

Odject F is the kind of small offering to the god which might be offered in conjunction with large figures during a village festival (see p. 26). The figure has been made in one piece and shows the erect stance of straight neck and legs of larger figures (photos 46, 47, 54 show Objects F, G, and H being fired and painted). Object F wears a fancy saddle blanket and a collar of bells. The dark blue face of the horse is one of the very few standard colour preferencee of village art. In some village temples the blue of the horse offerings' faces is the only colour to have survived the passage of time.

Figures of horses are offered most often to *Aiyaṉār*, the prime rider and protector of the village. However they may also be offered to *Karuppaṉ*, *Muttaiyā*, *Cōṇaiyā*, and variations of these major gods and possibly to others as well. Photo 79 shows a group of small horse offerings at a village temple.

Object G: Kāḷai (காளை), bull or erudu: photo 80

Figures of bulls are offered to the great village gods in much the same way as (and in conjunction with) horses although considerably less frequently. In recent times, it seems that the increasing influence of Brahmanical religious forms has strengthened the association between *Aiyaṉār* and the bull through the relationship with

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1. Rajagopalan 1970.

Śiva and his bull, Nandi. In some great temples in South India, for example the Alagar Koil near Madurai, great stud bulls are kept for sacrifice. This is a blending of village and city traditions with which I am not familiar. Photos 19, 23, 57 show examples of figures of bulls at village temples

Object H*: *Yāṉai* (யானை) "*elephant*": *photo 81

In a few very rare cases the elephant appears as the vehicle or mount of *Aiyaṉār*. As has been mentioned previously (p. 50), there are indications that the elephant may have played a more important role in village art at some earlier time and it is interesting to note a parallel between *Aiyaṉār*, the patron of agriculture, and Indra, the vedic god of storms, both of whom have ridden the elephant. Photos 82, 83 show the elephant as a mount of *Aiyaṉār* and as an offering similar to Object H. Photos 7, 82 show other forms of the association between *Aiyaṉār* and the elephant.

Object I, J, and K*: *Mataḷam piḷḷai* (மதளம் பிள்ளை)"*infant child*" *and tavaḻum* (தவழும்), *crawling*: *photos 84, 85, 86

Mataḷam Piḷḷai figures are representative of one of the most important cults or areas of concern in village religion. This is the desire for children and for delivering children from illness. Raising a large number of children, especially sons, to work and care for the old people is still the only form of social security for most Tamil villagers. The infant mortality rate in rural India is very high and modern medicines and treatment are often simply unavailable during a time of crisis or are too costly if available. The only hope for many villagers involved in the crisis of a child who is seriously ill is to approach village gods known for their intervention.

Pleas of this kind are often made to powerful gods (often *Māriyammaṉ* or *Aiyaṉār* but also other powerful *cāmis*) through *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* offerings. As in the case of most "personal" offerings, a barren woman might ask that the *pūcāri* (or the *vēḷār* himself) have a *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* figure made in her name and offered with other figures at the time of a festival. In some cases (photo 87) a very large number of these figures commissioned by a large number of individuals may be offered to the god at one festival. An indivi-

dual may give a donation or a fee (usually about Rs. 5) to the *pūcāri* for this service. The plea in this case might be, "*cāmi*, give me a child and I will present you with a figure of a child every year for the next five (or ten) years." In the case of illness a *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* figure may be made and offered in great urgency. This form of offering often amounts to an "exchange" by proxy, the plea being, "*cāmi*, take this child I am offering you and allow me to keep my own."

As in the case of most other offerings, *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* figures are usually placed close to a powerful god in the village temple (photo 36). After they have served their purpose they are moved to the back or side of the temple to decompose. I have seen them stored on the *maṇḍapa* roof

The offering of a *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* in its crawling form may involve a more complicated ritual. The figure, after being garlanded with margosa leaves at the house of the *pūcāri*, may be taken in procession around the temple three times. After placing the figure near the god the priest might be given a fee of Rs. 1. The figure might be carried by a man and his wife suspended in a cloth sack from a sugarcane pole. In times of crisis with a sick child, the child itself may be carried around the temple in a similar way. The stick and cloth sack arrangement is similar to the village cradle.

In the only case I ever witnessed of mud figures being sold to the "public," *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* figures were bought at a stall in front of the *Māriyammaṉ Teppakkuḷam kovil* (photo 88). This temple is famous for the god's ability to answer prayers for a child and the figures bought (for Rs. 5) at the stall are offered directly to the god (and later removed and resold, according to one sceptical observer).

It will be noted in Objects I and J and in the photographic examples that certain iconographical features characterize *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* figures generally. Most prominent among these is the vaselike construction of the body and the applied arms and projecting feet. The male figures (Object I) show a tight skull-capped head while the female figures (Object J) often have a knot of hair on top, sometimes offset in the ancient fashion. All figures have their baby bangles and earrings. The Śaivaite forehead stripes of Object I are

simply a part of being reverently dressed and are influenced by the urban traditions.

Some unusual forms of *Mataḷam Piḷḷai* are illustrated in photos 89, 90.

Object L: Pātam (பாதம்), *"foot", photo 91*

One of the more curious looking of the village offerings, the *Pātam* are placed at the village temple during a festival of a great god (see p. 26), usually on a personal basis. The common explanation was that a donor of this offering could hope to avoid foot injuries, insect bites, etc. which are a common and aggravating complaint of the barefoot farmer. The contractual plea may be, "*cāmi*, I will present these *Pātam* to you; please protect me from injuries in the fields this season" or "Please remove the disease or injury from my foot."

Photo 60 shows a *Pātam* installed close to the main figure of *cōṇaiya*. This is a typical placement of an offering of this type i. e. as close to a powerful god as possible.

I have heard the *Pātam* mentioned in connection with *Karuppaṉ* and although I suspect some strong relationship between this offering and that god, no confirmation or explanation can be attempted here.

Photos 39-44 show the creation of the *Pātam* figure in this collection.

Object M: Nāy (நாய்), *"dog", photo 92*

Although sorrowfully mistreated and abused, the dog plays an important role in protecting the village from intruders of all kinds. This role is acknowledged by the *vēḷār* in his depiction of watchdogs for the village temples. It seems that the dog protects both the god and the people themselves. I have been told that the "dog protecting the chief" is a common theme of Tamil folklore. Gods who protect the village are accompanied by dogs on their rounds and several times I was told that "with *Karuppu* there will always be a dog." One village god, *Nākappacāmi* (நாகப்பசாமி), Lord of Snakes, is always depicted with a dog on a leash. Figures of dogs, sitting on their haunches, standing, or in a few cases, lying, always wear a collar, a symbol of domestication and loyalty.

I saw figures of dogs in small or Isolated temples only; yet each example showed a sensitivity of conception and very high degree of characterization indicative, perhaps, of special care and recognition of the debt owed to the lowly dog (see photos 94, 95). This sentiment is expressed most vividly through an unusual stone figure in a small Brahmanical temple (to *Vināyagar*) on the Madurai / Mēlakkāl road (photo 96). Here, among the secondary figures to the left of the god, sits a dog loyal and alert yet wearing a sublime expression. He is named **māmu** (மாமு) or uncle, (**māmā** (மாமா) plus the endearment suffix). He is "dear uncle."

Object N: pūnai (பூனை), ***"cat", photo 93***

This is a village offering of a very unusual type. The explanation given was that in the villages where the cat appears in the temple there are hunters who seek out the *kāṭṭupūṉai* (காட்டுப்பூனை) or wildcat as a type of game, perhaps because it is a pest. These wildcats, although small, may cause injury and consequently the figure is offered in the expectation of the *cāmi's* protection. The wildcats are usually caught in a net stretched over a trail.

A close look at photo 99 will provide an example of the figure of a cat on a village temple platform (just to the left of the snake).

Object O: Cēval (சேவல்), ***"cock", photo 97***

This figure is representative of unusual circumstances under which the figure of a domestic animal will be offered either to increase the productivity of the animal or to recover it if lost or stolen. There are also many cases of figures of chickens (*kōḻikkuñcu* கோழிக்குஞ்சு or just "*kōḻi*") offered for the same reasons. Photo shows a chicken with eggs, a plea for success with a laying hen.

Object P: Pāmpu (பாம்பு), ***"snake", photo 98***

The snake in his case is *nāktappāmpu* (நாகப்பாம்பு), "cobra." The relationship between man and the snake is a very important and complex one in India. In both mythology and art from the very earliest times for which we have any record, the snake has been a symbol of fertility, of water and life, and of the divine.[1] In con-

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[1]. Much has been written on this subject. For an interesting approach and good bibliography see A. Sen 1972.

temporary popular Hinduism the cobra is closely associated with Śiva, "Lord of Snakes."

In the villages of Madurai District, the cobra is a very important mediator with the god in the case of a woman desiring a child. At the *Kōccaṭai Muttaiyācāmi kōvil* (கோச்சடை முத்தையாசாமி), for example, a cobra is fed each day with eggs placed in the hollow of a large tree. Women come to the tree to offer additional snacks or to tie a small *toṭṭil* (தொட்டில்) or cradle in the branches of the tree. These are common forms of presenting the plea for a child and are often combined with prayers to *Nākappacāmi* (நாகப்பசாமி), "Snake God."

There is extreme reluctance among village people to kill a cobra even though they may be terrified of it in a threatening situation. I have witnessed this dilemma on one occasion. I have been told that one who kills a cobra will never have children.

Snakes of many kinds, nevertheless, present a constant danger to the villager and especially to the barefoot farmer. Object P is an offering made to the village god in the hope that he will intervene to protect the donor (and perhaps the donors's relations) from the danger of snakes. The form of the cobra is chosen for the offering because this "king of snakes" has most influence with other members of its kind.

Photo 99 shows a very similar figure that has been offered at a village temple. Photo 107 shows a simpler form of a similar offering.

Object Q : Āmai (ஆமை) "tortoise", photo 101

Among creatures that village people try to avoid, none is more feared than the tortoise. The tortoise is an omen of extremely bad luck, so much so that if one should pass in front of a house someone inside would surely die. This belief is very widespread in the area of Madurai District. Photo 106 shows offerings of the tortoise grouped with figures of other pests, given in the hope that with the help of the god the donor will be able to avoid the danger.

Object R : *Tēḷ* (தேள்), *"scorpion"*, *photo 102*

Anyone who has been stung by a scorpion will testify that it is one of the most painful experiences imaginable. The smaller brown coloured variety of this creature is common in the rural areas of Madurai District and is a pest to the villager (the sting of most varieties of scorpion is not, under normal circumstances, fatal). This type of offering is placed at the village temple in the hope that the *cāmi* will intervene to protect the donor from scorpions during the coming months or, often, year. Object R is an example of the rough style of the smallest villages and temples.The tail is broken off. Photo 106 shows many of this type of figure in place at a small temple.

Object S : *Tēḷ*, *photo 103*

This is a more life-like figure of a scorpion used in the same way as Object R. Other small creatures, figures of which are offered in a similar way, are insects that eat paddy and other crops, *pūcci* (பூச்சி) and *vaṇṭu* (வண்டு).

Object T : *Eṟumpu* (எறும்பு), *"ant"*, *photo 104*

Many varieties of ants in Tamil Nadu are capable of a painful sting. This offering is taken to the village temple in the hope that, with the help of the *Cāmi*, the donor might avoid such problems. As with the other "pest-avoiding offerings" (Objects P through K) this offering would usually be commissioned by an individual and be presented at the time of a festival. I saw these types of small offerings only at small village temples near or actually out in the fields.

Object U : *Karaiyāṉ* (கரையான்), *"white ant/termite"*, *photo 105*

This particular ant is a favourite delicacy of village cuisine during certain periods of the year. "Four days after the rain" they emerge from their hills in the soft sand (this is in the adult stage with wings) and at this time the abdomen is full of an oily substance considered to have " a very fine taste." The ants are ground and fried. Often the children gathering them with strainers (placed over the hills) will pop them directly in their mouths.

V. Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this study I have hesitated some what to use the words "artist" and "art" to describe the *vēḷār* and his work. The common western connotations of these terms make it difficult to understand village art in rural Tamil Nadu. Why for instance, does a man lavish his total care and skill on an object that will be "obsolete" in a year or two and that very few people will see only a few times? How does a group of poor, largely illiterate, and completely parochial craftsmen develop and maintain an art form of wide extent and variation yet with a uniformly high quality of design and execution? To answer these questions we may now discard, or at least modify, the criteria of "inspiration," "talent," and "aesthetics" with which we usually approach and attempt to understand works of art.

It is first necessary to divide the *vēḷār*'s art into its component parts. The basis of this art is the *vēḷār*'s ability as a potter. The precise quality of line and proportion of the mud figures in even the smallest village temples appears uncanny until one sees the *vēḷār* at work. He is a master craftsman, professionally

familiar with thickness and with curve in shapes of all kinds. He knows what there is to know about working with mud.

Another component of the *vēḷār's* art is, of course, his particular skill in modelling figures for the village temple. We have discussed how the *vēḷār* develops these skills through his family tradition and also some of the factors involved in shaping the styles that have become part of these traditions in Madurai District.

A third element of the *vēḷār's* art is the role of some vēlārs as *pūcāri*. In this case the *vēḷār* activates the figures in the purposes for which they are made.

All three of these components, rather than simply the skill of modelling figures itself contribute to the ability of the village artist. Complete control of the medium and familiarity with its potentialities developed through potting and complete familiarity with the purpose and meaning of the figures (i. e. the requirements of the gods and of the people) developed through being *pūcāri* are parts of an integrated system of knowledge that is the *vēḷār's* art.

Muthusamy's evaluation of mud figures, reflecting on the success of the artist and his work, was based on whether the piece was or was not "proportionate." A close examination of the choice and use of this term is helpful in understanding this *vēḷār's* conception of art. First, a piece that was not well made (not balanced, finished, or proportionate in the strict sense) was "not proportioate." Muthusamy's dislike of "modern art" was due to its apparent lack of proportion for he could not see the balance in the design nor skill in the technique. A question on this subject would often lead to his mime of the "modern artist"--blind drunk, as Muthusamy imagined he must be, impulsively producing painting after painting and shouting, "more brandy!" To the *vēḷār*, the first requirement of something proportionate is that it be "made with art," that is, with the skill and balance of a master craftsman.[1]

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1. Ananda Coomaraswamy's contention that a thing is a work of art, made by art, but is not itself art, forms the foundation of his fascinating consideration of folk art (1956:18).

In another way a piece that was iconographically confusing or ineffective in execution, that is, deficient in special modelling technique could also be "not proportionate." This was often a matter of taste and, as we have seen, several different styles exist yet the figure of, for instance, a dog which because of an over-long body or too thick legs did not look like a dog or did not leave the impression of a dog, could be considered "not proportionate."

Finally, a figure that was not appropriate to or worthy of its particular function in the village temple would at times also be termed "not proportionate." An example was Muthusamy's reaction to two great *Pūtams* at a local village temple. Both were well modelled, each showed good balance and skill yet the newly renovated "cinema style" face of the larger *Pūtam* did not, in his opinion, project the proper mood of a *Pūtam* and was thus deficient in its function. A small feud had taken place involving Muthusamy's relative in a large town nearby. The basis of the feud was apparently a disagreement over the "appropriateness" of the *Pūtam's* face. Much more "proportionate" (appropriate/effective) was the rougher looking *Pūtam* at the gate of this temple. Muthusamy suggested I photograph this *Pūtam* and below it up to massive proportions and hang it over my door to amaze my friends.

It seems that in fact village people themselves have very little conception of the village figures as "a form of art." The village figures as a group are rarely referred to at all; instead they are considered to be part of the temple itself. The figures are the accepted result of the best qualified man performing his traditional privilege of providing for the necessities of the temple. The common reaction among village people to my photographing and doting over the mud figures in their village temples was one of good natured puzzlement reserved for friendly aliens. A typical comment came from a man who suggested that I save my film for "the Hanging Gardens of Bombay." If, on the other hand, I was watching a *vēlār* working on either pots or figures for the temple or was attending a *pūja* or festival, the local people accepted my interest easily. In other words, they understood an interest in the *process* of creation of mud figures or in their actual *use* in worship but not

in the figures themselves as "art." I was always urged to photograph the figure currently under worship as figures in the process of "being art" rather than the residue of old figures that had become empty pieces of mud.

If we are to collect examples of such folk art for a museum, it seems that our first responsibility is to try to understand what it means to those who make and use it. We must never be content to present such material in attractive display and let the pieces "speak for themselves." If one wants only aesthetic satisfaction, then the visit should be to an art gallery where one views things made to be hung on a wall and looked at--things made to speak for themselves in our culture. In the museum we most often deal with articles made to be used. In the case of many folk and village arts the artist probably never conceived of his creation hanging on a wall, an object of display. The fact that we find these things beautiful often accounts for their collection, however the visual beauty is only part of their meaning, perhaps the most immediate one, but not necessarily the most important in appreciating or learning from them.

Any "museum of man" has the opportunity, in fact the responsibility, of detaching itself from the legacy of cultural imperialism and outright theft that has characterized the development of major museums. If the directors of a museum see this as a priority, it may be useful to refuse to collect or to accept anything old or "antiquated," that is, to help stop the flow of irreplacable cultural treasures from poor countries to rich ones by taking nothing except living artistic and cultural traditions. The ethical considerations involved in an acquisition policy for an anthropological museum are extremely complex and it has been all too easy for anthropologists and opportunists of all kinds to spirit out the humble looking but historically priceless material remains of dissolving and changing cultures in "developing" countries, learning little and leaving nothing behind. This is simply a sophisticated and academically condoned plundering, little different in fact from the shameless trading in stolen and smuggled goods in which many major museums collecting classical art still indulge.

If a policy of concentrating on living folk arts were adopted, it would hardly be a limitation to the anthropological museum. In collecting and, ultimately, in displaying a living contemporary folk art, we have the opportunity of studying the process of art and not merely the static remains. We need not remain preoccupied with objects that we find pleasing or "rare" or "unique" but for which we have limited documentation or none at all. If we can overcome the exclusiveness of our idea of art as "objects" and think more in terms of art as "process" we will move further toward understanding human creativity and man.

VI. The Future of Village Art

The mud figures are still the means by which most village people in Madurai District relate to their gods. The vast extent, high quality and vitality of mud sculpture in villages today is ample evidence of a continuous ability to adapt to changing requirements and tastes. Most better known folk arts in India have fared badly in this respect. It seems that when a village artist begins to distribute his products outside the traditional scope or market, as when his work is sold to outsiders or in this cities, the art becomes static and degenerate within a very short time. The original purpose and meaning of the work become secondary to considerations of what will sell and what will have ornamental appeal to the new market. The result is an art consisting of a few conventionalized designs that are popular and can be turned out in large numbers. Despite the fact that the *vēlār* of Madurai District has remained free of such pressures there are several trends in modern Indian life which indicate an uncertain future for his art.

The *Pūñcōlai* (பூஞ்சோலை) or "flowering park" *Muttaiyā* temple seemed a strangely prophetic symbol of the meeting of village and city. It had originally been a village temple but, being absorbed by the urban sprawl of Madurai, it is now on a busy city street. The cracked and peeling figures of seventeen village gods stand on the inside porches of three walls, seemingly unnoticed by workers cutting and welding steel beams in the courtyard. The City Municipal Office now owns the temple and rents it to construction firms as a workshop. Someone told us that "two or three" people still come to worship there. Two other village temples absorbed by other parts of the city are quieter or completely dead. The figures now stand unattended. The family or *pūcāris* who once worked for the temple may still hold the key but the temples have become only places for old people to sit and talk during the afternoon. It seems that village concepts of worship cannot in many cases bear close contact with the city. This has important implications for the future of all village art as it appears that "the city" (as a system of attitudes and beliefs) is moving out into the country side at a much faster rate than ever before. The new temples built in rural areas are for Brahmanical gods with no need of mud figures. Many temples of the village gods are now derelict and crumbling.

Other pressures affect the *vēḷār* directly. As longlasting plastic and aluminum vessels become slowly but inexorably more popular, the *vēḷār* begins to lose his livelihood. Of approximately 100 families engaged in potting in one large village near Madurai at the turn of the century, only five families carry on this work today. When general economic hardships set in, the *vēḷār* must diversify or pick up and move, almost surely to a different job. As we have seen some manage to move to other jobs utilizing their previous skills, such as Muthusamy, a high school art teacher, and his relations, film studio modellers. Unfortunately, these are exceptions.

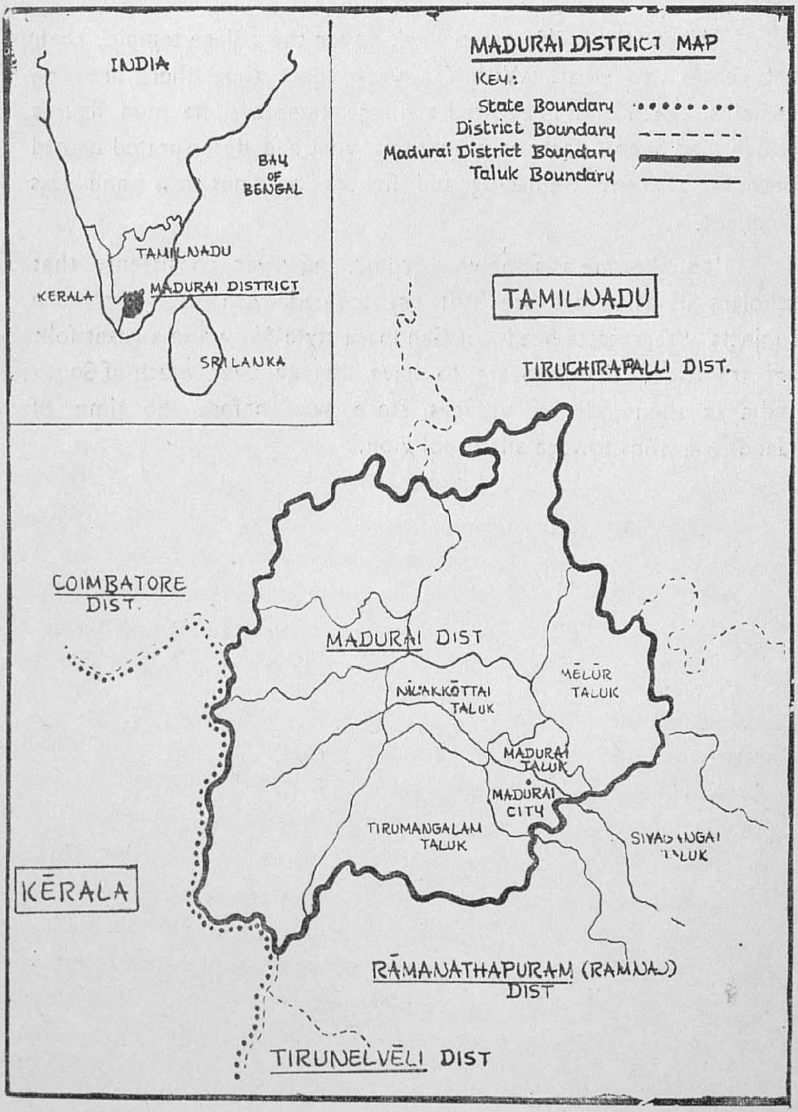
After visiting many temples and meeting the *vēḷārs* I realised that most who are working actively for village temples are old men. Young people are not working and learning in sufficient numbers to perpetuate the art, at least in the area of my visits. One group of

vēḷārs themselves foresaw the decline of their art "within fifty years."

When the *vēḷārs* stop working for the village temple, their art ceases to exist. Within a very short time there are few remains. Each time I revisited a village temple some mud figures which had been intact on a previous visit had deteriorated or had become broken. Replacing old figuers becomes less and less frequent.

It strikes me as somewhat ironic, however consistent, that scholars of asian art are still preoccupied with such shopworn subjects "terracotta heads of Gandhara style"[1] while a great folk art tradition, that appears to have thrived over much of South India in thousands of villages since well before the time of Gandhara, slips toward silent oblivion.

1. The semi European court art of a kingdom that ruled a relatively small part of north-west India for a relatively short period of time at the beginning of our era.


MADURAI DISTRICT MAP
KEY:
State Boundary
District Boundary
Madurai District Boundary
Taluk Boundary
INDIA
BAY OF BENGAL
TAMILNADU
KERALA
MADURAI DISTRICT
SRILANKA
TAMILNADU
TIRUCHIRAPALLI DIST.
COIMBATORE DIST.
MADURAI DIST
MĒLŪR TALUK
NILAKKŌTTAI TALUK
MADURAI TALUK
MADURAI CITY
TIRUMANGALAM TALUK
SIVAGANGAI TALUK
KĒRALA
RĀMANATHAPURAM (RAMNAD) DIST
TIRUNELVĒLI DIST

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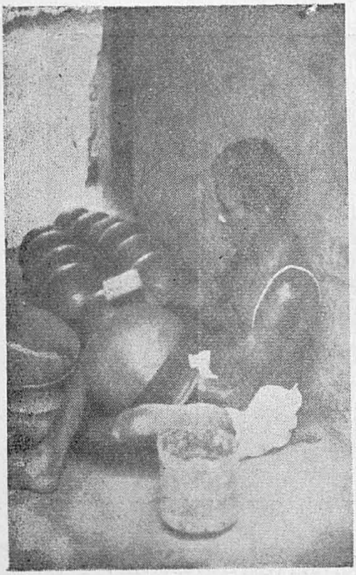
NOTE : for an extensive bibliography of Indian folk art, see Kramrisch 1968.

photo 1 **Vēḷār street,** Ārappāḷaiyam (ஆரப்பாளையம்)

A common sight in the potter's area of a village are finished products stored outside the homes, waiting for sale. In the foreground are "country stoves" of fired mud used by most common people in Tamil Nadu. Beyond these are cooking and storage pots and in the background some large watering troughs. A vēḷār here stands with his family's work.



photos 2, 3 **Vēḷārs at work** - Tiruppuvaṉam (திருப்புவனம்)

Photo 2 shows a man and woman at work together. Note the lpi and upper section of the pots in the foreground. They had been thrown on the wheel and left to dry for some time before the bottom was added. Photo 3 shows the method by which the bottom is formed. The hand inside the pot holds a rounded stone or wooden "anvil". The "hammer" is a wooden mallet. The two original sections of a broken pot can be seen behind the Vēḷār's feet.

photo 4 **Vēḷār making watering troughs** - village Nayiṉār Pēṭṭai (நயினார் பேட்டை) (Ramnad dist.)

A vēḷār works in his yard, hand forming large watering troughs for cattle. He devoutly wears the ash markings of a pūcāri (priest) for his daily work. He also wears a string of holy beads and a sacred thread signifying his "twice-born" status in the local Hindu system and the unusually important privileges and responsibilities of the potter group in this part of India.

photo 5 **Viḷakkukkūṭu** (விளக்குக்கூடு) lamp cover - village Putukkōṭṭai (புதுக்கோட்டை)

A specialty item made by the vēḷār is a cover for a small oil lamp left at a shrine. This one is decorated with a pattern of stars and a trident.

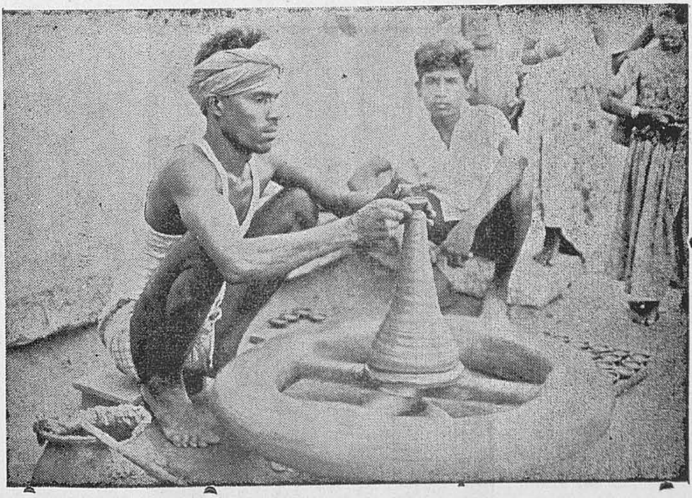


photo 6 **Vēḷār making small lamps** - village Tēnūr (தேனூர்)

Making tiny lamps for the **Kārttikai** festival (கார்த்திகை), (the Tamil Deepāvaḷi or "festival of lights"). He moves the mud up from the main cone on the spoke-type wheel and detaches a small dish-shaped piece with the help of a small wire. In this way he can make up to one hundred lamps an hour. The finished lamps are laid on a board to dry (as in the background of the photograph). The pot on the left is for water to keep the mud and the hands wet.

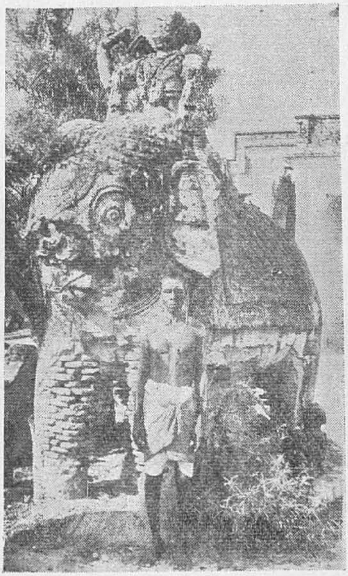


photo 7 **Pūcāri** (பூசாரி) - Māṭakkuḷam Aiyaṉār Kōvil
(மாடக்குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

This pūcāri stands before an old massive figure of Aiyaṉār mounted on an elephant. (see also photo 27)

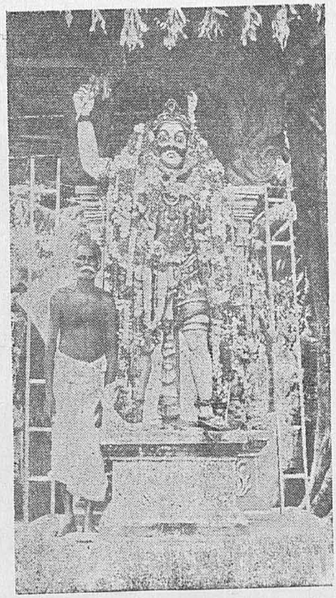


photo 8 **Cāmiyāṭi** (சாமியாடி) with Muṉiyāṇṭi (முனியாண்டி); Alaṅkāṉallūr Muṉiyāṇṭi kōvil (அலங்காநல்லூர் முனியாண்டி கோவில்)

This cāmiyāṭi is a great wizard and is devoted to Muṉiyāṇṭi. The large figure of the god is made of plaster and has been renovated (repainted and plastered) recently. This figure stands in the sanctum of the temple, a small pavilion of bamboo and thatch. Other figures of Muṉiyāṇṭi from this temple are shown in photos 32, 62. Note the garlands which hang on the figure from the most recent festival and the prominent canine teeth which give the ferocious aspect to this god. The cāmiyāṭi appears to have grown his full moustache in an effort to more closely resemble the one to whom he is devoted.

photo 9 **Pāmpāṭṭiccittaṉ** (பாம்பாட்டிச் சித்தன்) - Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

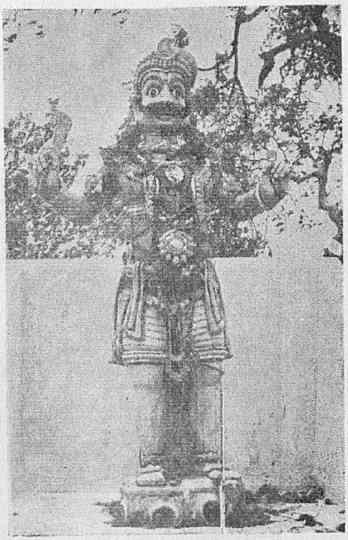
A beautiful example of the vēḷār's art, this Pāmpāṭṭi Cittaṉ wears a tight-fitting cap, an elaborate tunic, and a fancy trimmed short waistcloth bound with a belt hung with tassles. The earrings consist of small pendant clusters fixed through the upper ear and huge sets of hoops hung from the lobes. Heavy bracelets and finger rings complete the jewelry. The figure plays his snakecharmer's double-barrelled flute and the snake emerges from his basket in the lower part of the composition. A broken figure of one of Aiyaṉār's Dēvis (P. 50) can be seen on the right side of the photograph.

photo 10 **Patra-Kāḷi** (பத்ரகாளி) between two Pūtams (பூதம்)
Ciṅkam Piṭāri Cēvukapperumāḷ Aiyaṉār kōvil
(சிங்கம் பிடாரி சேவுகப்பெருமாள் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

Patra-Kāḷi, a guardian of the village boundary, is seen in the background of this photograph. She wears an elaborate flaming headdress and carries a noose. The demon figure in the foreground is a Pūtam, a guardian of the temple. This massive figure and his counterpart (barely visible on the right side of the photograph) support the front legs of the rearing horse of (in this case) Karuppucāmi. These figures are all made in brick and plaster, displaying a boldness and strength of detail rarely seen in more recently-made figures.

photo 11 **Mañcamalai Āṇṭi** (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி) - Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

A fine figure of a great local god whose personal power is renown over a wide area. As an "*āṇṭi*" or holy man (lit. a pauper), this figure wears a stylized cap of long hair tied up with holy beads, a large neck-piece, and a garland over one shoulder and arm (now broken). Simple necklace (like a talisman case), anklets and girdle complete the ornament. The figure wears a brief loincloth and wooden platform-type sandles of an ascetic. The flowing moustaches and beard combined with the bulging eyes and very heavy brows give an appropriate impression of power. The figure sits cross-legged, the position of a holy man rather than a king.



photos 12, 13 **Nallayaṉcāmi** (நல்லயன்சாமி)
Kallaṇai Nallayaṉcāmi kōvil (கல்லணை நல்லயன்சாமி கோவில்)

Both are figures of Nallayaṉcāmi; the one on the left is six years old, the one on the right, three years old (approx.). The newer figure stands on the cement platform sanctum and the older has been moved behind this. In comparing these two figures we may notice some subtle but important differences characteristic of some contemporary stylistic trends in the vēḷār's art. Most striking, perhaps, is the difference in the faces of the two figures; the dramatic realism and characterization of the older figure contrasts with the stylized "mask-like" face of the newer. The newer type of face, with huge staring eyes, fat cheeks wider than the forehead, and puckered mouth and chin has become a popular detail in the representation of many village gods. (see also photo 60, 62)

It may also be noted that the jewelry and detailed work is generally finer and more gracefully modelled in the older figure; the newer relying to a large extent on paint for detail. Finally much of the "living" quality of the older figure is derived from the stance. One foot placed slightly in front of the other turns the entire torso slightly and gives the impression of power and movement. The newer figure, with its straightup stance, seems rooted and rigid.

photo 14 Vimāṉa and maṇḍapa, - Māṭakkuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil
(மாடக்குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

A very elaborate village on which must be noted the modified Chola-style vimāṉa or tower over the sanctum and the richly carved pillars and capitals of the maṇḍapa or pillared hall. These are direct influences of the Brahmanical tradition and the traditional architecture of the South Indian kingdoms (the history of this architectural style is well documented; see Jouveau-Dubreuil, 1917 (1972). This is a sanctum of Aiyaṉār, and his vehicle, the elephant, is placed before the maṇḍapa.

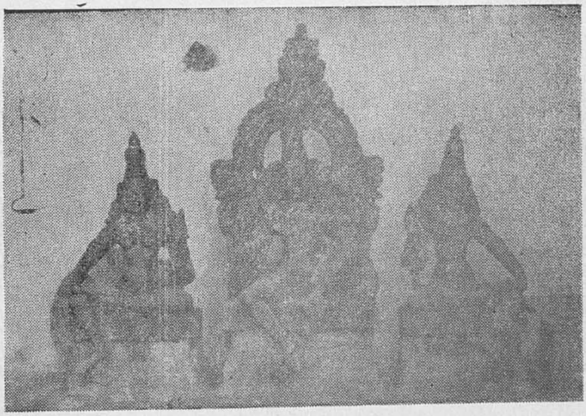


photo 15 Aiyaṉār (ஐயனார்) with Puṣkalā Tēvi (புஷ்கலா தேவி) and Pūrṇā Tēvi (பூர்ணா தேவி) - Pūñcakkōvil Aiyaṉār kōvil (பூஞ்சக் கோவில் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

An unusual stone sculpture has been installed in the sanctum of a small village temple. The shape of the backslab contributes to the flowing effect of the figures' long hair. The piece is "dressed" with a long cloth. Vināyakar (or Gaṇēsh) appears on the left. See P. 50 for more details.

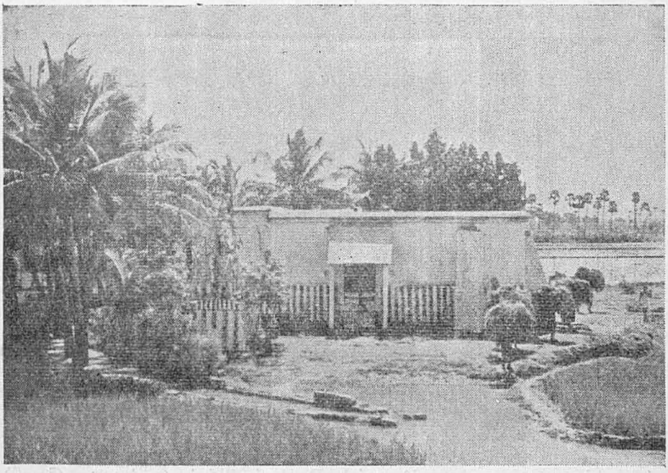


photo 16 **Cōṇaiyā kōvil** - Pāppākuṭi (சோணையா கோவில்-பாப்பாகுடி)

An average-size village temple set in the paddy fields on the edge of the village. In the left center of the photograph, outside the temple wall can be seen a massive mounted figure (close-up-photo 23). The vertical stripes (red and white) painted on the wall of the temple is a feature common to most South Indian temples. To the right of the photograph, agricultural workers move bundles of paddy straw.

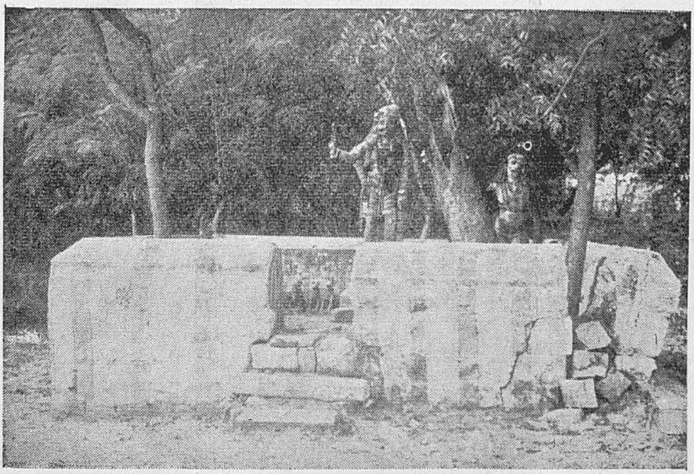


photo 17 Tēṉūr Muttaiyā kōvil (தேனூர் முத்தையா கோவில்)

A small temple set on the edge of a field on the outskirts of the village. In place are two figures of Muttaiyā, one Caṉṉāci (**சன்னாசி**), and three guardian dogs (see photo 94).

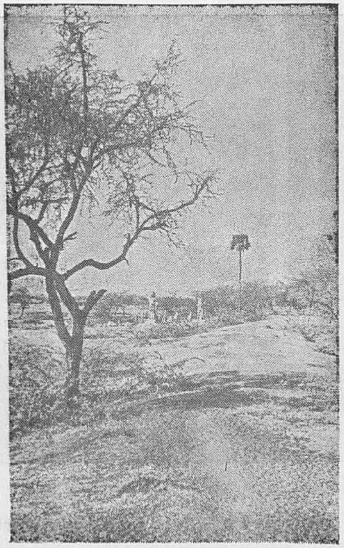


photo 18 **Karical Kuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil (கரிசல் குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)**

Two massive Pūtams (பூதம்) and a large group of mud figures stand in the fields beside a tank bund or dike. The nearest village is a half mile distant. (Close-up, Photo 25).

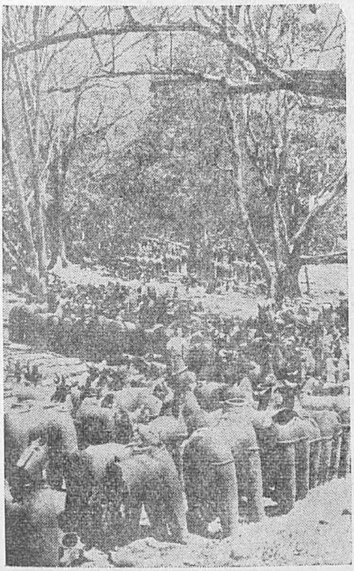


photo 19 **Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil**
(மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

Also: Muṉiyāṇṭi on porch at Alaṅkānallūr-Photo 21.

Here hundreds of mud figures are distributed around a small sanctum in an isolated forest grove.

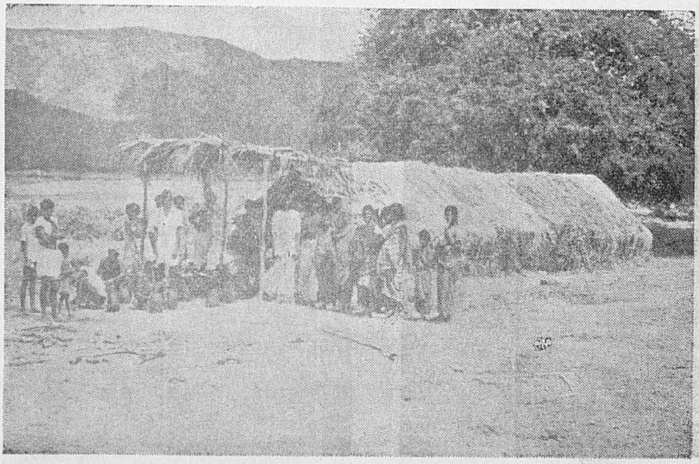


photo 22 **Vēḷārs work shed** - Valaiyapaṭṭi (வலையபட்டி)

The long bamboo and thatch shed in this photograph had been especially constructed as a work and storage center for a group of vēḷārs making figures for a festival. At the time this photo was taken, there were between fifty and seventy-five figures of horses and bulls already modelled and drying in the shed. Later, a large pit was dug beside the shed in which the figures were fired. The pot-like forms being worked on at the entrance to the shed are the first stage of heads for figures of horses.

Because of the work in progress, the ground around the shed was considered sacred; as in a temple, the footwear had to be removed before approaching.

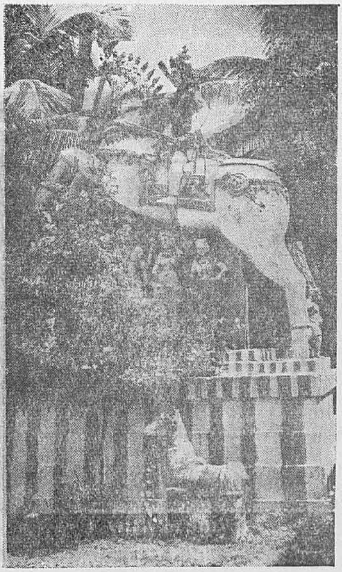


photo 23 **Cōṇaiyā** (சோணையா) - Cōṇaiyā kōvil, Pāppākuṭi (சோணையா கோவில், பாப்பாகுடி)

Photo shows a fine massive figure made of brick and plaster with a stone base. The side figures are Siva on the left with Mōhini and Pārvati illustrating the "birth of Aiyaṉār". The modelling is graceful and complimentary to the entire composition. A small bull offering made of mud stands in the foreground.

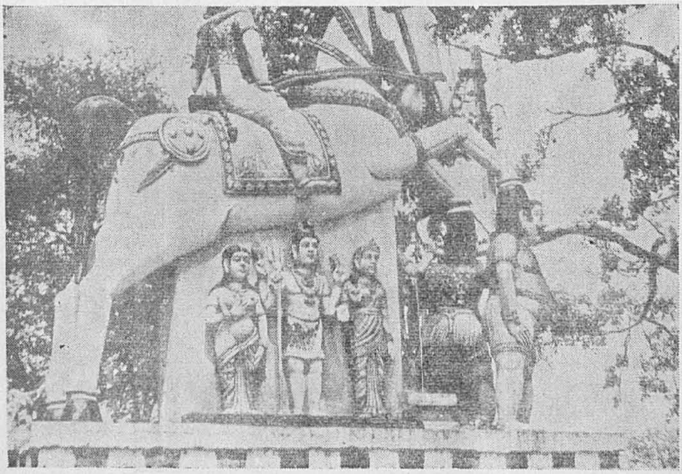


photo 24 **Aiyaṉār** (ஐயனார்) - Aiyaṉār kōvil, (ஐயனார் கோவில்) Madurai / Dindigal road

This very recently-made figure is simple in detail. The modelling appears stiff and comparatively lifeless. The side figures illustrate the same story as in photo 23.

photo 25 **Pūtam** (பூதம்)
Karical Kuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil
(கரிசல்குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

Also Pūtam photo 26
Kōocaṭai Muttaiyā Kōvil
(கோச்சடை முத்தையா கோவில்)

A massive figure made of brick and plaster, standing 15 feet tall. In the upraised hand the figure holds a great club, **taṇṭāyutam** (தண்டாயுதம்) and in the other, a **vēl** (வேல்) or short spear. See photo 30 for details of dress.

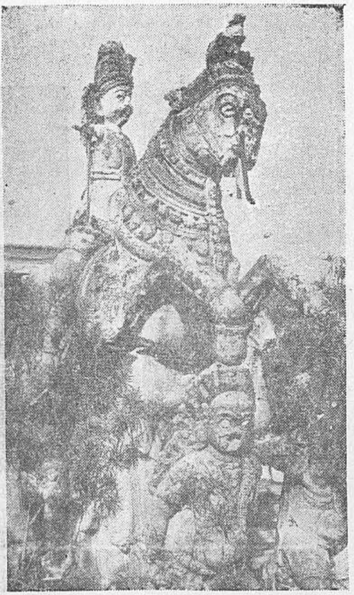


photo 27 **Karuppucāmi** (கருப்புசாமி) - Māṭakkuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil (மாடக்குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

This very old massive figure (possibly two hundred years old) is now severely damaged. Note the iron rod protruding from the shoulder of the figure of Karuppu and the support rod from shoulder to hip. The foundation piece which supported the horse's head is wood sheathed on two sides with flat iron bars. The fine detailed plaster work still evident on the horse's colaı is rarely seen on recently-made figures. Another massive figure from this temple (there are five in all) is seen in photo 7 and 83.

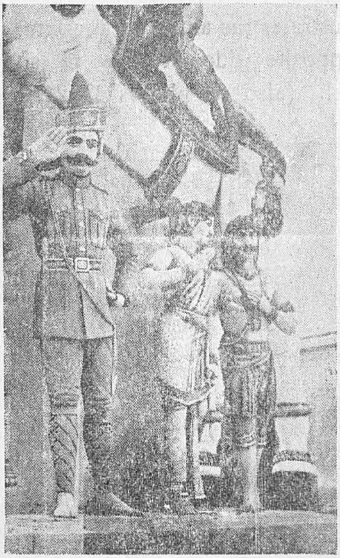


photo 28 free-standing **side figures**
Aiyaṉār kōvil, Tiruppuvaṉam
(ஐயனார் கோவில், திருப்புவனம்)
(Ramnad dist)

photo 29 **half-relief side figures**
Karuppaiyā kōvil, Tuvarimāṉ
(கருப்பையா கோவில், துவரிமான்)

Both these photos show "side figures" which are invariably depicted on the sides of the massive mounted figures These most often illustate stories such as "the birth of Aiyaṉār" or show scenes of human life. The popularity of homely scenes, such as groups of singers and dancers seems to suggest the idea of the side figures as human or mundane life under the protection of the great mounted hero. From a purely architectural point of view, the side figures fill the large empty space between the base of the massive figure and the belly of the horse.

Photo 28 shows large free-standing side figures in a large temple. The saluting figures in the western-style uniform (of police or state militia) is probably a local man thus commemorated because of the prestige of his association with the rulers of the time. The other two are figures from local mythology. On the other side of this massive figure, very erotic figures of Mōhini and Pārvati help illustrate the story of the birth of Aiyaṉār. Note that the figures are supported by heavy stantions running up their backs.

Photo 29 shows side figures modelled in a simpler and looser styel common in small temples. This simply illustrates the antics of a milkman and milkmaid. The side figures on the opposite side of this massive figure show musicians playing for a festival. (also see photos 23, 24)

photo 30 **Pūtam** (பூதம்) - Taṇṭīsvara Aiyaṉār kōvil-Allinakaram (தண்டீஸ்வர ஐயனார் கோவில்-அல்லிநகரம்), (Ramnad dist.)

This truly massive figure although supported by a stone base and, I suspect, some brick foundation, is made mainly of mud. Like most of its type, this figure is very old; parts have fallen off and the fine painting including the details of the eyes has faded away. The men at the temple could not remember this figure or any like it being made.

This is a great demon, one of a pair guarding the sanctum of the temple from inside the main temple wall. The figure's hair is done in ringlets some of which fall on his shoulders. He wears a headband. The demonic eyes and moustache frame a mouth of carniverous teeth with fangs. The figure wears two neckchains and a garland and has a pair of cobras on his shoulders. A short tight tunic and short pants bound with a girdle, usually brightly painted (see photos 25, 26) complete the characteristic dress of the Pūtam.

The left arm of the figure rests on the remains of great club (**tanṭāyutam** - **தண்டாயுதம்** or **katai** - **கதை★**) and the right is held up; now empty but possibly meant to hold an arivāḷ (அரிவாள்) knife. A pūcāri of this temple, unusually young for the job at twenty years old stands before the Pūtam figure.

★ (Sk. Gadā)

photo 31 **Muṉiyāṇṭi** (முனியாண்டி) - Cammaṭṭipuram Muṉiyāṇṭi kōvil (சம்மட்டிபுரம் முனியாண்டி கோவில்)

This massive figure and its counterpart, made almost purely of mud, is one of the few of this type which exist today. Traces of tempera painted designs from the last renovation can be seen on the body of the horse.

The figure is probably between one and two hundred years old and the style owes little to the common recent influences of classical art styles.

photo 32 **Aiyaṉār** (ஐயனார்) - Cammaṭṭipuram Muṉiyāṇṭi Kōvil

photo 33 **Muṉiyāṇṭi** (முனியாண்டி) - Alaṅkānallūr Muṉiyāṇṭi kōvil (அலங்காநல்லூர் முனியாண்டி கோவில்

A group of life-size mud figures of the god of which each has played its part as the main figure at some time during the past twenty or thirty years. The old figures now stand in a fenced off area behind the main sanctum-(see photo 8). Note the elaborate hairstyles with ringlets and the beautiful yokes and girdles. The fine detail of the modelling and the bold characterization of each individual figure are among the strongest traits of traditional village art.

photo 34 **Horse offering** Taṇṭīsvara Aiyaṉār kōvil, Allinakaram
(தண்டீஸ்வர ஐயனார் கோவில், அல்லிநகரம்)

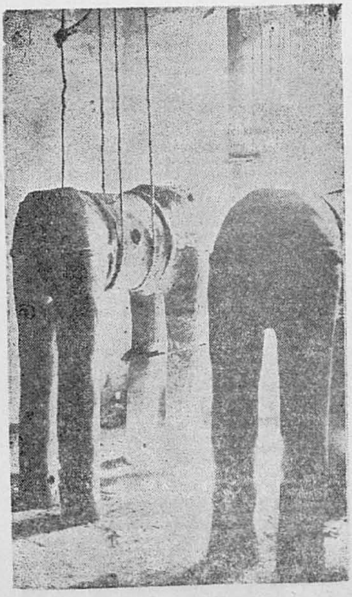


photo 35 **New horse figures**
Ṅīlamēkam Cami kōvil
(நீலமேகம் சாமி கோவில்)

photo 36 **Vīraṇaṉ** (வீரணன்)
Caṅkaiyā kōvil, Potumpu
(சங்கையா கோவில், பொதும்பு)

Photo 35 shows newly-made horse figures drying in a temple out-building. The bodies of the figures are suspended by ropes from the rafters until the legs have become strong enough to support the figure.

Photo 36 shows a popular village god, Vīraṇaṉ ("heroic elder brother"). Note the support from hip to elbow. A small Maṭalam Piḷḷai figure (P. 56) stands in the corner.

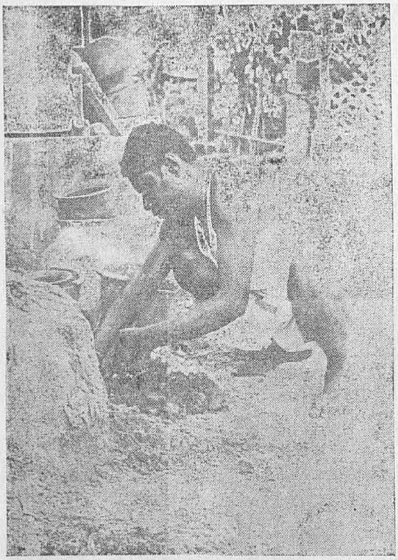


photo 37 Digging out the mud

photo 38 Mixing with the feet

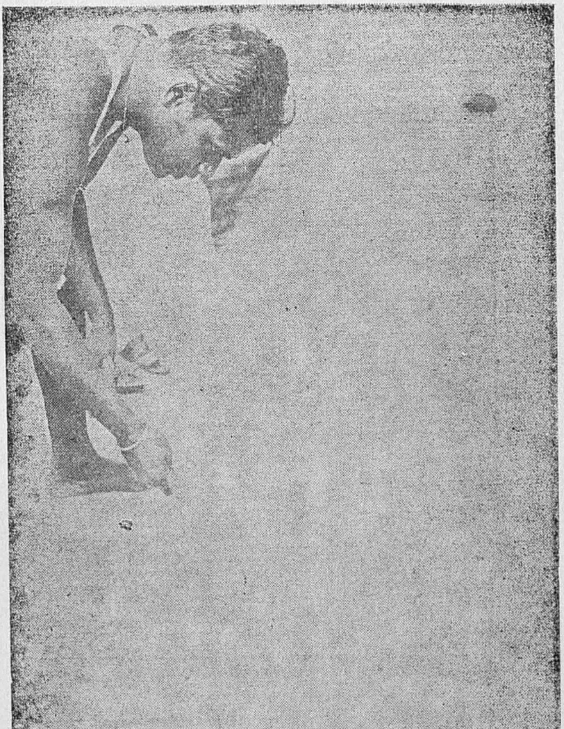


photo 39 Preparing a work surface

photo 40 Polling out some mud

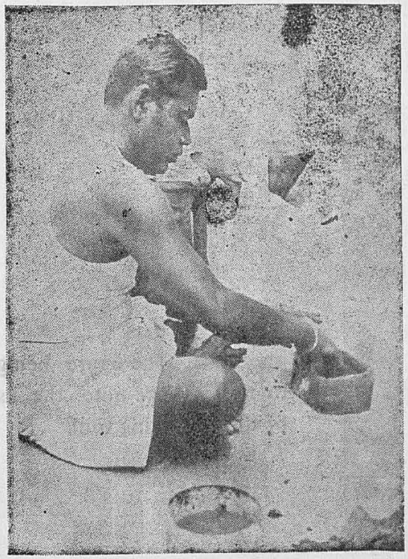
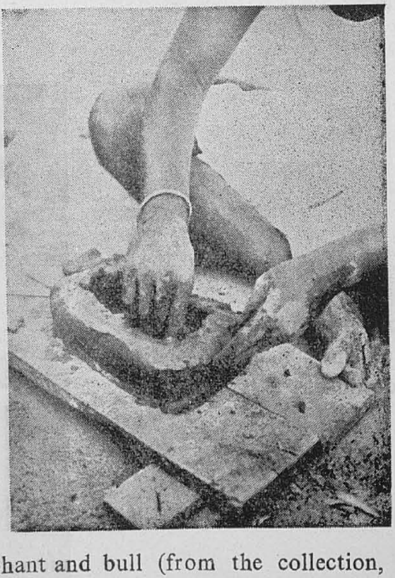


photo 41 Building the base ↑ photo 42 Adding internal supports ↓



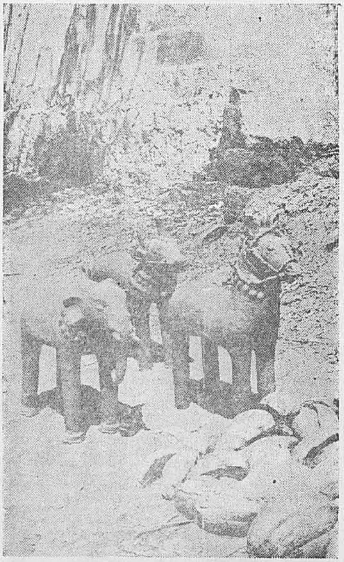
Note the figures of the elephant and bull (from the collection, P. drying in the background. The figure being prepared in this series of photographs is the Pātam in the collection (P. 57).

photo 43 The figure beings to take shape-note the use of the modelling tool.

photo 44 Only the surface detail and finishing remains to do done.

photo 45 **Aiyaṉār** (ஐயனார்) and consorts

Figures drying in the shade of a temple porch. Some detail is usually added after a figure has partially dried.



photos 46, 47 Three figures now in the collection being prepared for firing.

photo 48 ↑ Paddy straw is added

photo 49 ↓ The straw is packed with a long flat stick.

photo 50 Several layers of ash are added

photo 51 Water is sprinkled over the heap

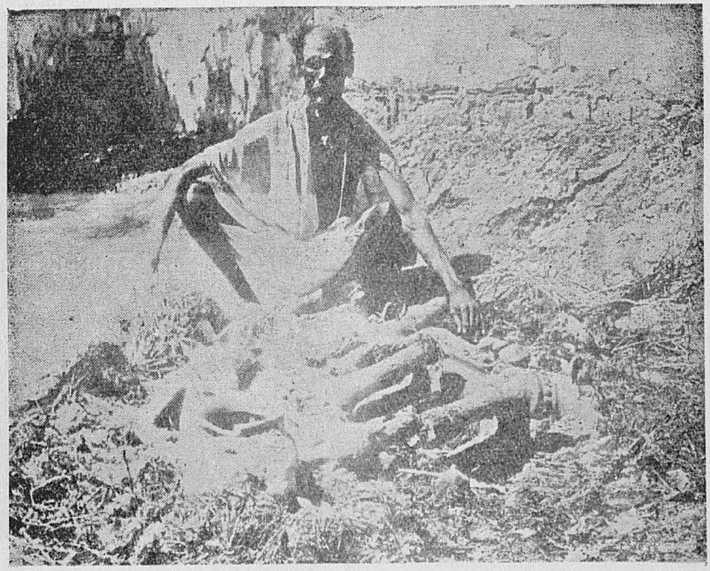


photo 52 The firing is now complete and the figures are cooling.

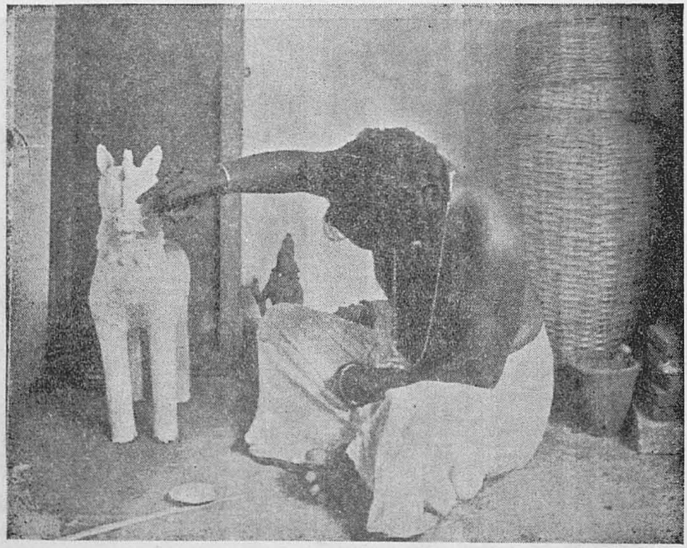


photo 53 A coating of lime or white paint leaves a smooth surface **for** painting.

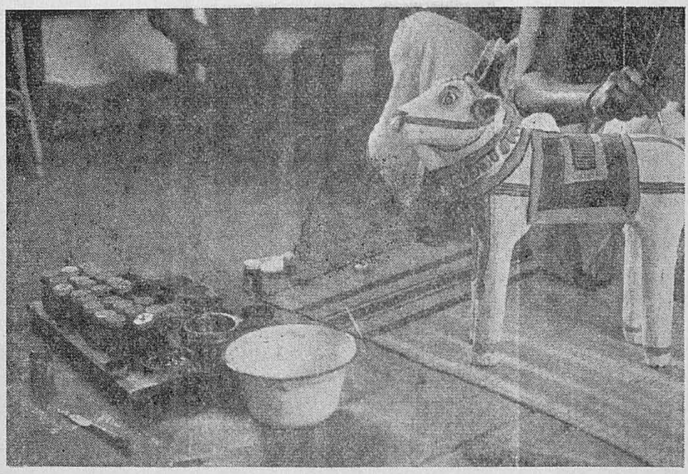


photo 54 A vēḷār's collection of poster and tempera paints. Cheap commercial brushes are used for applying the paint.

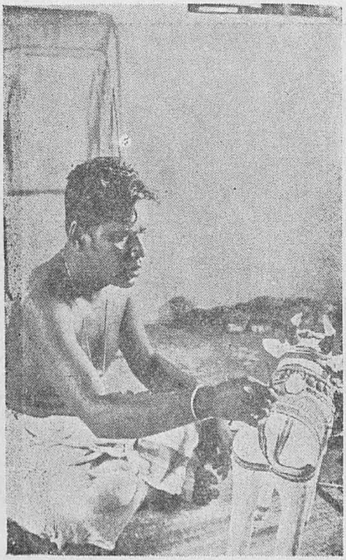


photo 55 With the increase in popularity of bright colors and the decline of sculptural detail in the vēḷār's art, painting has become a a very important skill.

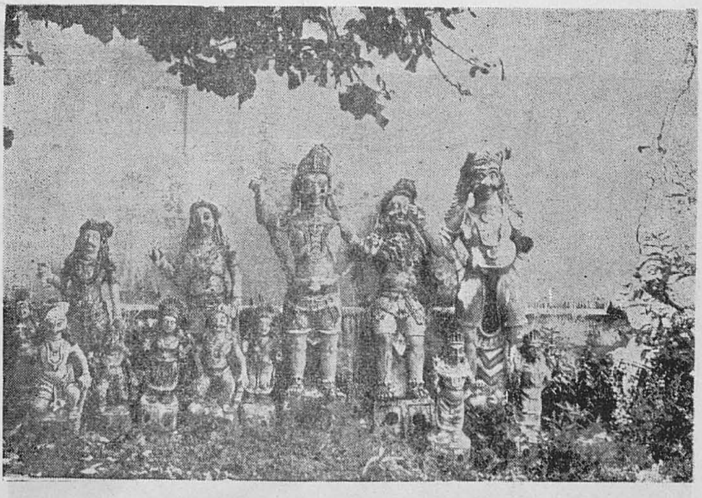


photo 56 **Group of figures** Cōṇaiyā kōvil, Pāppākuṭi
(சோணையா கோவில், பாப்பாகுடி)

Discarded figures stacked up against an inside wall of the temple. These will be left until they melt or break apart. This group consists of figures of Cōṇaicāmi (சோணைசாமி), Noṇṭikkaruppan (நொண்டிக்கருப்பன்) Pēcci Ammaṉ (பேச்சி அம்மன்), and Iruḷāyiammaṉ (இருளாயி அம்மன்).

photo 57 **Offerings to Aiyaṉār** (ஐயனார்) Karical Kuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil (கரிசல்குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

In open village temples, mud figures often break and fall apart-in this case, before the paint has hade time to fade.

photo 58 3-4 years old

photo 59 2 years old

Cōṇaiyā (சோணையா) or Cōṇaicāmi Cōṇaiyā kōvil, Pāppākuṭi (சோணையா கோவில், பாப்பாகுடி)

photos 58, 59 60 **Three figures of Cōṇaiyā** (preceding page)

These three figures of Cōṇaiyā have been worshipped in succession over the last four years. By comparing them closely, we may perceive how quickly the style of art within one vēḷār family may change and also notice the trends that some of these changes are following. From the outset, we may notice that the figures are becoming progressively more simple in their modelling technique. The oldest figure is by far the most elaborate having more appendages, specially in the crown and ribboned

(see over)

photo 60   6 months old

girdle. The newer figures must rely more on painted detail than relief modelling. The two more recently-made figures have arms supported by struts, while the older figure, made by a more complicated and time-consuming process, needs none. We may notice a progression toward a stiff frontal stance and a mask-like face; a progression toward a more schematic and standardized representation. Please compare this series of photos with photos.

On the right side of photo 59 one can see the palanquin or litter used to transport the new figures to the temple (P. 26). On the right side of photo 60 there appears a small Pātam offering (P. 57).

photos 61, 62 Two figures of Rākkāyi Amman (ராக்காயி அம்மன்)
Nilaiyūr Temple (நிலையூர் கோவில்)

Note: **A similar process illustrated through these two figures.**

photo 63 **Pūtam** (பூதம்) supporting massive mounted Aiyaṉār figure Mēlakkāl Kaṇavāy kōvil (மேலக்கால் கணவாய் கோவில்)

This bigger than life-size Pūtam was convincingly described as "the only one like this". Local people find this figure terrifying especially for the "hairs on his body"; villagers avoid passing the place at night. The main mounted god was described to me as "Aiyanār" which would seem likely from the dress; a fairly modern Indian army uniform complete with issue boots. Aiyaṉār is typically the only one of the great mounted heros to be "updated" in this way. The others never deviate from the ancient kingly styles of dress. The identification becomes more complex, however when we note that the mounted figure wears the mark of Visṇu on his forehead, sports a black moustache and holds an arivāl (அரிவாள்) village knife. These are all characteristics more closely associated with Karuppaṉ. It seems that the artist took a very unconventional approach to this figure.

This is a fairly recent example of brick, cement and plaster work. The horse especially has a chubby, "merry-go-round" look when compared to older, more graceful figures.

photo 64 **Muṉiyāṇṭi** (முனியாண்டி)
Alaṅkānallūr Muṉiyāṇṭi kōvil
(அலங்காநல்லூர் முனியாண்டி கோவில்)

photo 65 **Saraswati** (Hindu goddess of learning)
Ajanta Cinema, Alaṅkānallūr

Both figures were made by a well-known local artist, using similar processes. Photo 64 is a modern-style massive figure. Note the Pūtams in the foreground hold horns as well as the usual clubs and stand free of the horse figure. Musicians are seen as side figures. The cinema figure in photo 65, likely inspired by the elaborately modelled sets of the Tamil films themselves, is representative of a style of art which is becoming popular throughout Tamilnadu.

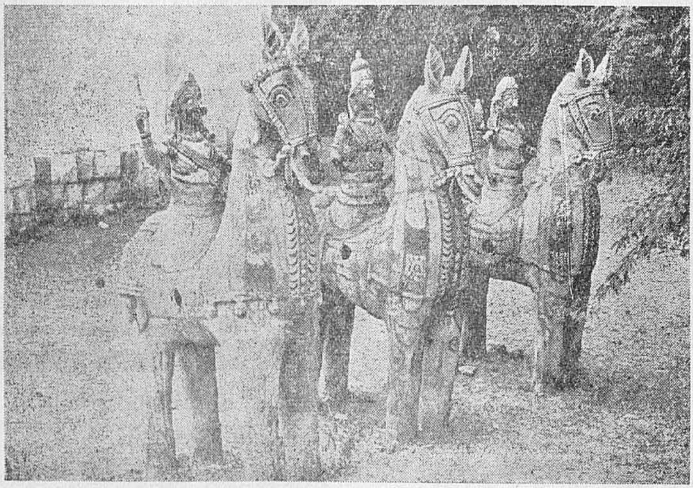


photo 66 Mounted Aiyaṉār (ஐயனார்) flanked by two figures of Karuppu (கருப்பு).

Tēnūr Muttaiyā Kōvil (தேனூர் முத்தையா கோவில்)

photos 67, 68, Objects B and C (Collection)

Aiyaṉār Aiyaṉār

Photo 69, Aiyaṉār, with consorts, object D (collection)

photo 70 Aiyaṉār (ஐயனார்) Allinakaram Aiyaṉār kōvil (Ramnad dist.)
(அல்லிநகரம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

This small and sensitivly modelled figure of Aiyaṉār sits perched on the back of a large mud horse. Long hair is suggested by winglike panels and the earlobes are extremely distended. The graceful curve of the lower garment contributes effectivly to the whole composition.

photo 71 **Aiyaṉār** (ஐயனார்) with consorts Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

A magnificent piece of village modelling showing the tension and fullness of the bodies neatly offset by the delicate and skillful use of applied beads and tubes of mud, especially in the face and jewelry. The jewelry is of ancient type. Note the composite earrings and flower shapes over the ears. The conical helmet/crowns may be an influence of Muslim styles (there was a Sultanate established at Madurai for a short period during the ascendancy of the Muslims in Central India). A partial back-frame helps to hold the composition together. Aiyaṉār's vehicle, the elephant, is depicted on the front of the base of the similar figure in the background.

photo 72 **Aiyaṉār** (ஐயனார்) and consort, Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil
(மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

A strongly modelled figure, unique in many ways. It is modelled in only three-quarter round, the backs of the figures melting into the full backslab. The "three-tiered crown" of kingship is depicted in a highly stylized, strangely futuristic way. The horizontal emphasis is continued through the heavy eyebrows and lids. The jewelry consists of very heavy pendant earrings; neck pendants (note the similarity with Object C of the collection). The chests and lower bodies are modelled with a loose and flexible feeling. The simple short cloth of Aiyaṉār is very unusual. Aiyaṉār's consort holds the lotus in one hand and a round object, perhaps a fruit, in the other.

This is the only figure I have seen so far representing Aiyaṉār with one consort. Like the previous example (photo 71), this is an extremely "ancient" piece among village figures, perhaps the oldest I have yet

photographed. It is probably fifty years old, and possibly as old as one hundred. Despite the distinctively village character of this piece, some details, for example the enormous nose extending from the eyebrows and the treatment of the eyes themselves, suggest the influence of classical styles of South Indian sculpture.

photo 73 **Aiyaṉār** (ஐயனார்) with composite figure
Karical Kuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil (கரிசல் குளம் "mud tank" ஐயனார் கோவில்)

An example of the very simplest form of village modelling, the figure of Aiyaṉār (on the right wears a cap-like helmet and a neck pendant more painted than modelled. Like Object C, this figure was made to be fitted onto a mud horse or bull. To the left of the photograph is a peculiar-looking figure made up of the discarded body of another Aiyaṉār figure and the head of a Maṭaḷam Piḷḷai (see Objects I, J and K). In isolated outdoor temples, such as this one, figures are often broken by wandering livestock and it is common for someone to try to arrange the broken pieces not always in the original order.

photo 74 Object E (Collection) **Kaṉṉimār**

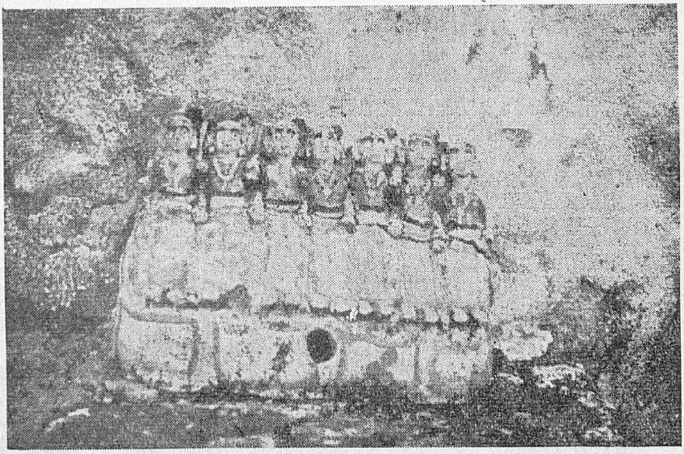


photo 75 **Kaṉṉimār** (கன்னிமார்) Caṅkaiyā kōvil, Potumpu (சங்கையா கோவில், பொதும்பு)

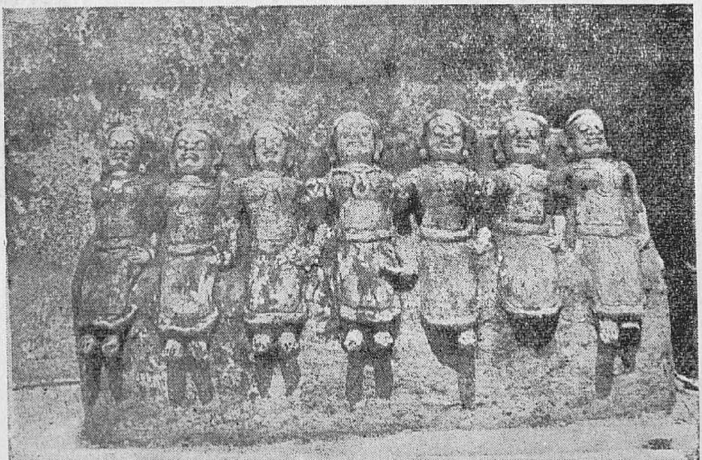


photo 76 **Kaṉṉimār** Aiyaṉār kōvil, Tiruppuvanam (ஐயனார் கோவில், திருப்புவனம்) (Ramnad dist.)

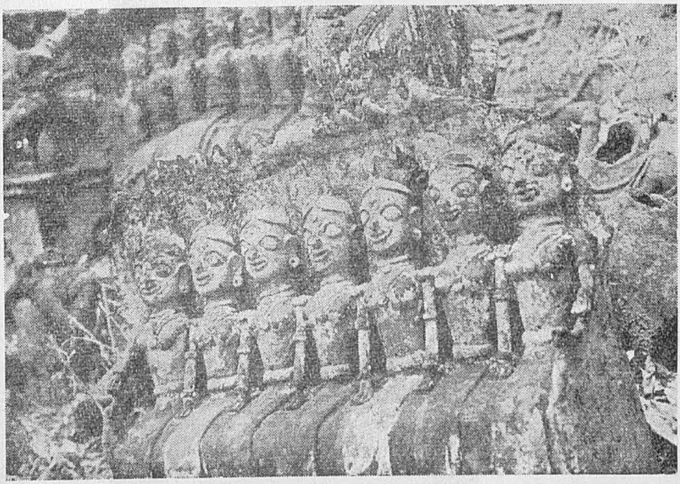


photo 77 Kaṉṉimār Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

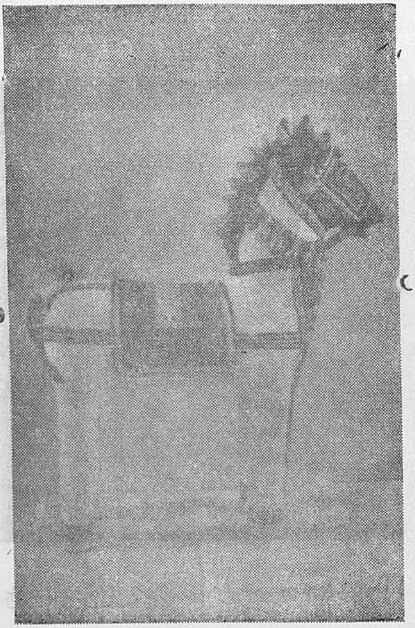


photo 78 Object F (Collection) **Kutirai**

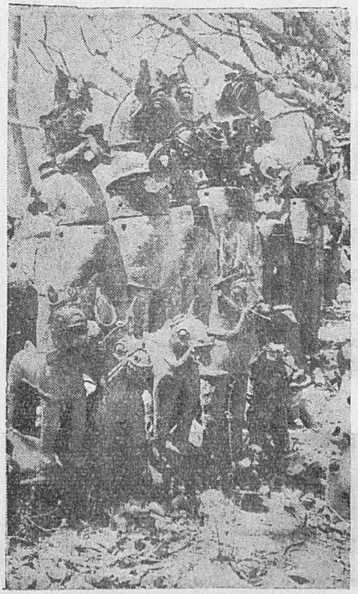
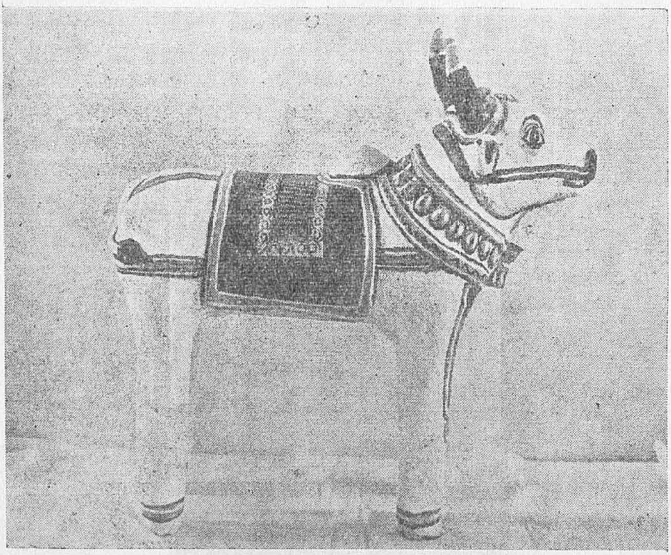
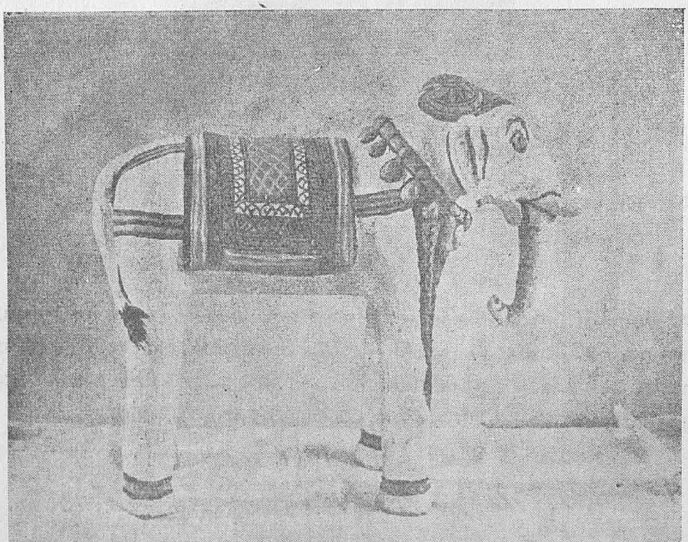


photo 79 **Group of offerings**-Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்மலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

A group of horse offerings shows full-size figures in the background and small figures, similar to Object F of the collection in the foreground. Note that some of the small figures are built on a base and some are free-standing. Many have fallen and have been propped up again.





photos 80, 81 Objects G, H (Collection) **Kāḷai**, Yāṉai

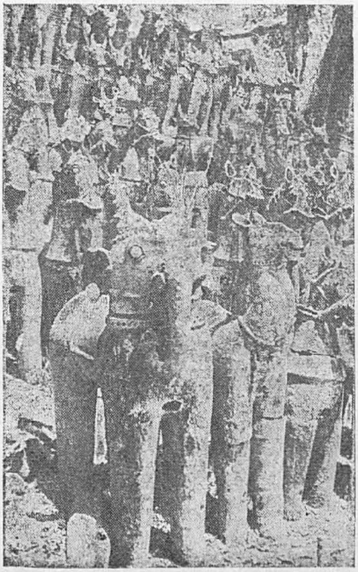


photo 82 **Group of offerings** Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

A large group of full-size mud figures, mainly horses and bulls, which have been offered at festivals and then lined up to become part of the temple. In the foreground is the dramatic and unusual figure of an elephant which has been offered to the god (in this case either Mañcamalai Āṇṭi or Aiyaṉār). Next to the elephant is the unique figure of a camel (**oṭṭakam**, ஒட்டகம்), an animal not otherwise found in village art of this region (to my knowledge). The only explanation that I have been able to devise for the existance of this figure is that the artist must have seen the camels kept for religious purposes by the Meenakshiamman temple in Madurai.

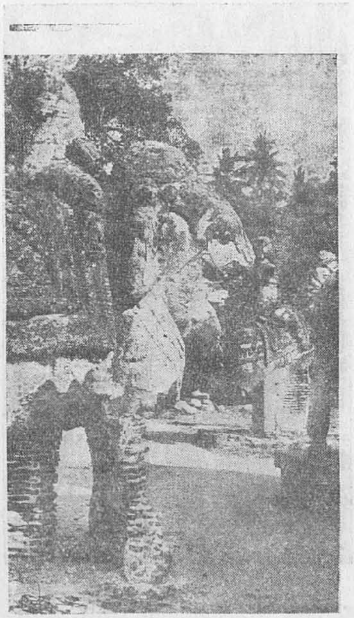


photo 83 **Aiyaṉār (ஐயனார்)** on an elephant
Māṭakkuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil (மாடக்குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

This very old and badly damaged massive figure is "two hundred years old", according to the pūcāri. Note the use of a very old type of flat brick in the foundation and the very heavy coating of plaster, especially on the saddle blanket. Another massive figure from the same temple is shown in photo 27.

photos 84, 85, Objects I, J, **Maтaḷam Piḷḷai**

Photo 86, Object K. **Matalam Piḷḷai**

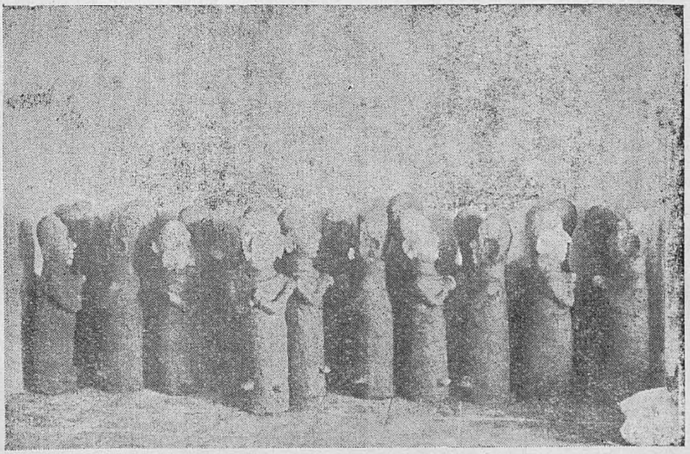


photo 87 **Group of Matalam Piḷḷai** drying on the porch of a vēḷār pūcāri in Alaṅkānallūr town. These figures have yet to be fired and painted. They were to be offered at the upcoming festival of the local dominant god, Muṉiyāṇṭi.

photo 88 **Large Mataḷam Piḷḷai** for sale at the Māriyammaṉ Teppakkuḷam Kōvil along with the usual bananas, coconuts and sandlewood paste - the basic essentials of worship. In a crate behind the counter were five or six other figures. They would be taken inside and offered directly to Māriyammaṉ.

photo 89 **Group of Mataḷam Piḷḷai** figures at Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்).

These are the utmost in economy and simplicity of design. Note the figure in the left foreground. This is a figure of a baby in a cradle, toṭṭil (தொட்டில்), itself a symbol of the plea for a child. A close look will reveal the baby's feet hanging over the back of the cradle.

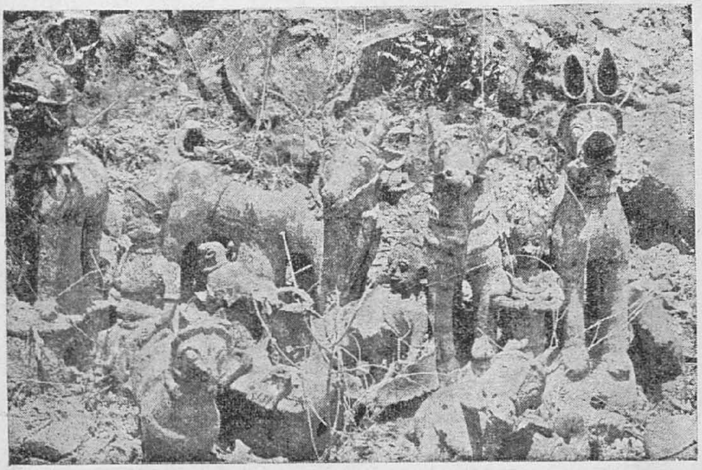


photo 90 **Another group** at the Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil.

This old and broken collection of Mataḷam Piḷḷai figures contains some unusual types; the figure on the right consists of a figure of a child seated between on the right, a horse (with the large ears) and on the left a bull. In the middle is the long figure of a cow feeding a calf, this a symbol of motherhood serving as a Mataḷam Piḷḷai. Between these figures is a very simple, concise baby in a broken cradle.

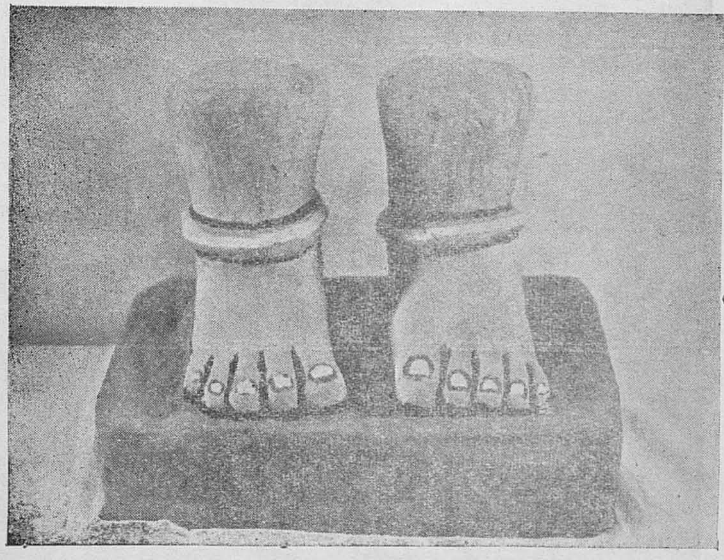


photo 91 Object L (Collection) Pātam

photos 92, 93 Objects M, N (Collection) Nāy, Pūṉai

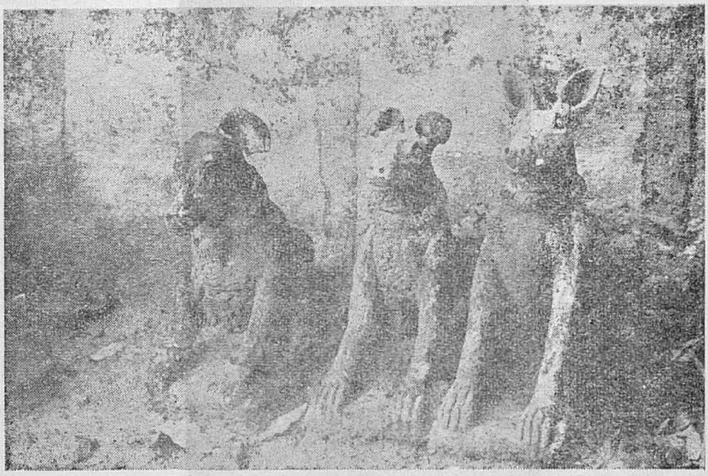


photo 94 Dogs Tēṉūr Muttaiyā kōvil (தேனூர் முத்தையா கோவில்)

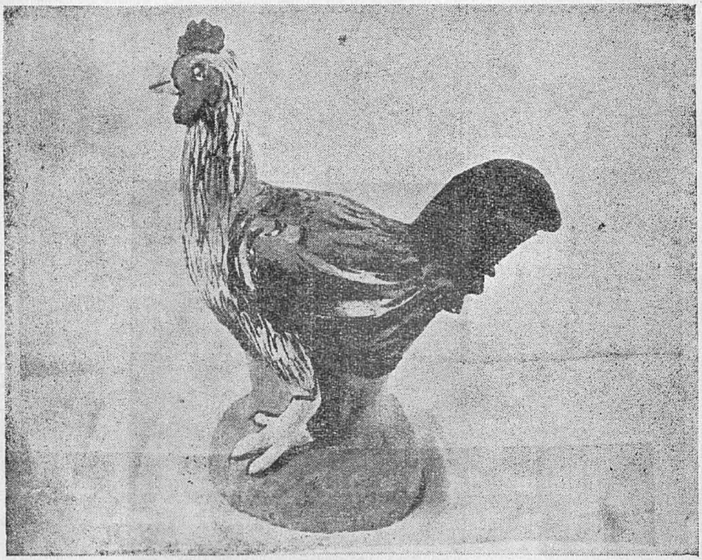
Note the attentiveness of each powerful portrait.

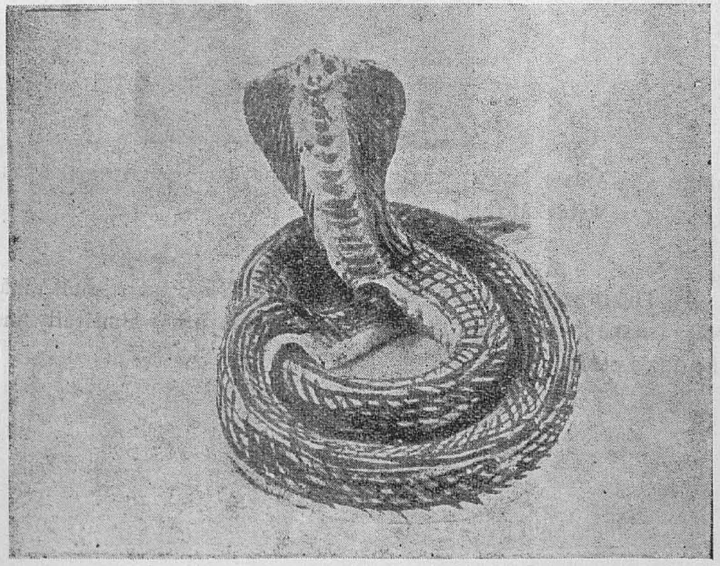
photo 95 **Dogs** Mañcamalai Āṇṭi kōvil (மஞ்சமலை ஆண்டி கோவில்)

Standing and barking the ridge running around the fiigures at the top of the legs is characteristic of small animal figures. In the background are full-size figures of bulls.

photo 96 **Māmu** (மாமு) "dear uncle" Vināyagar Kōvil on the Madurai/ Mēlakkāl road.

The other figures are (from right) large Vināyagar, small Vināyagar, Nāga (snake). Note that the sculptor of Māmu has whimsically included the dog's penis.

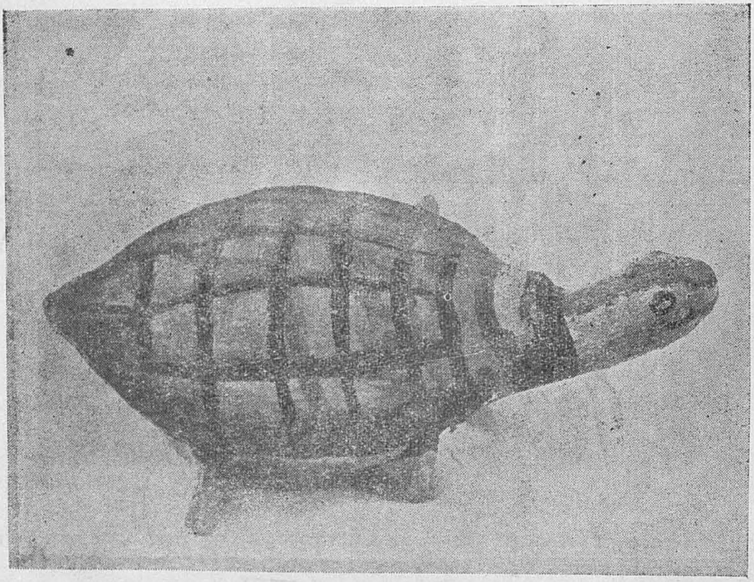


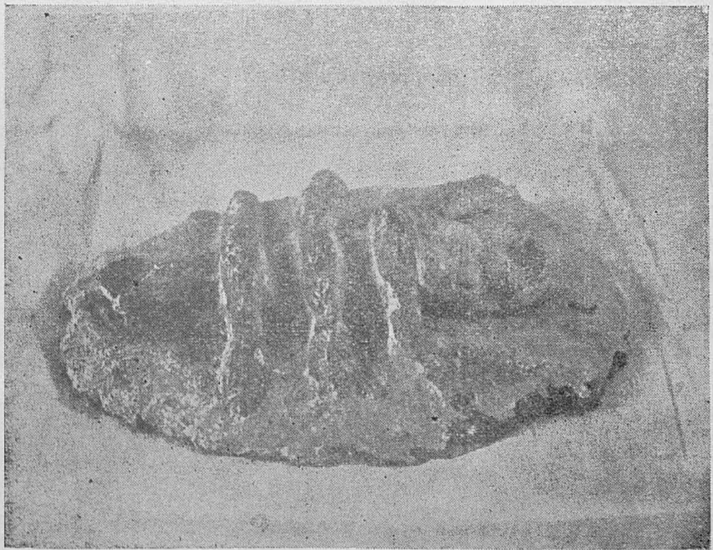


photos 97, 98 Objects O, P, (Collection) **Cēval, Pāmpu**

photo 99 **Group of offerings** Karical Kuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil (கரிசல் குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

1. nāy (நாய்) dog
2. Mataḷam Piḷḷai (மதளம் பிள்ளை) (crawling)
3. cēval (சேவல்) cock
4. kōḻi (கோழி) chicken
5. Mataḷam Piḷḷai (crawling)
6. nāy
7. Mataḷam Piḷḷai (crawling)
8. Mataḷam Piḷḷai
9. pūṉai (பூனை) cat
10. pāmpu (பாம்பு) snake
11. āṭu (ஆடு) goat
12. nāy





photos 101, 102, Objects Q, R. (Collection) **Āmai, Tēḷ.**

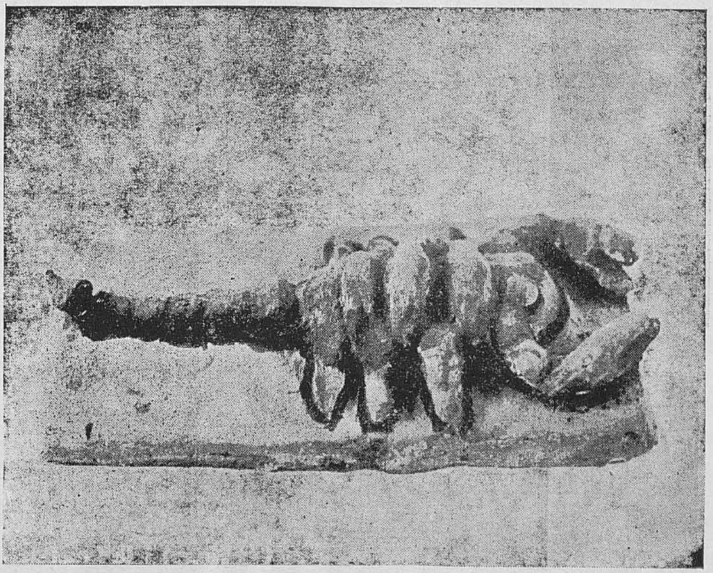
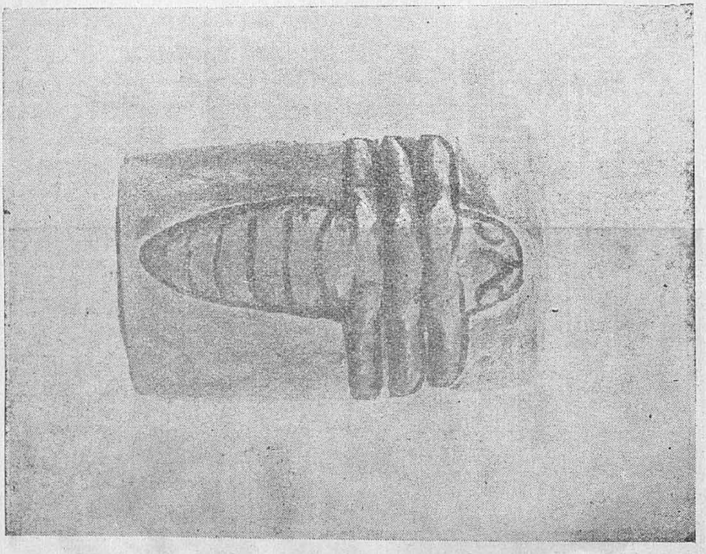
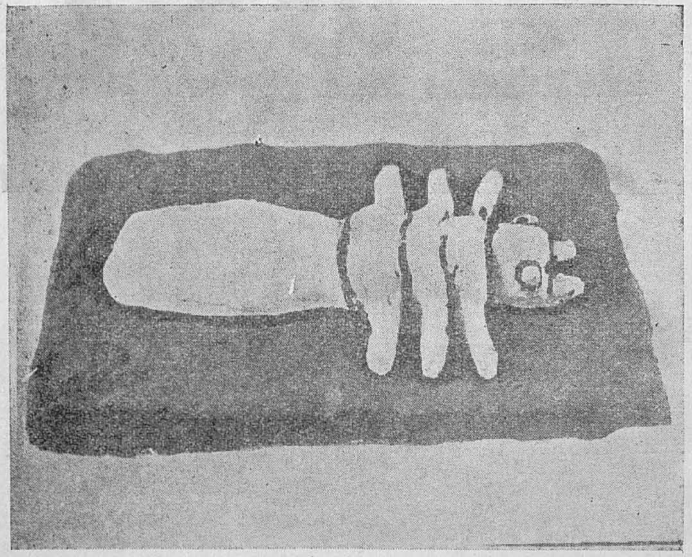


photo 103 Object S. Tēḷ





photos 104, 105, Objects T, U (Collection) **Eṟumpu, Kaṟaiyāṉ**

photo 106 **Group of offerings** Karical Kuḷam Aiyaṉār kōvil (கரிசல் குளம் ஐயனார் கோவில்)

photo 107 detail of photo from left:

tēḷ (தேள்) scorpion
tēḷ or eṟumbu (எறும்பு) ant
pāmpu (பாம்பு) snake
tēḷ or eṟumbu
āmai (ஆமை) tortoise
tēḷ

Errata

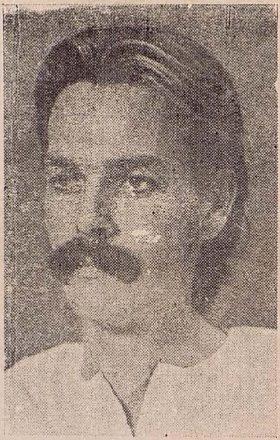
The following passages which are *Italicised* are the corrections.

page 1	(title)		"Village Art of South India" should read *A Village Art of South India*
page 3	para 2	line 3	"p. 68" should read *p. 70*
page 4	para 2	line 4	"Venugopa" should read *Venugopala*
page 5	para 1	line 4	"An 's' often" should read *An 's' will often*
page 8	para 1	line 4	Please omit reference to Photo 2.
page 8	para 2	line 7	"(photo 3)" should read *(photo 2)*
page 10	para 2	line 3	"vēḷār pūcāri is" should read *vēḷār pūcāris*
page 11	para 3	line 3	"personel" should read *personal*
page 13	para 2	line 6	"pñcāri" should read *pūcāri*
page 13	para 5	line 2	" 'secondaty priest' " should read *"secondary priest"*
page 16	para 1	line 1	" 'level' " should read *"levels"*
page 17	para 1	line 8	"of the important" should read *of importance*
page 18	para 2	line 23	"(the name almost supposed" should read *(the name almost surely*
page 21	para 2	line 14	"herber" should read *herder*
page 24	para 2	line 17	"than the common" should read *from the common*
page 27	para 3	line 10	"(photos 20, 21)" should read *(photo 21)*
page 27	para 3	line 13	Please omit reference to photo 20
page 32	para 4	line 1	"visited few" should read *visited a few*
page 32	para 4	line 4	"In valaiyapaṭṭi," should read *In Valaiyapaṭṭi,*
page 42	para 3	line 6	"with mightly elongated arms; dēvis with tany waists" should read *with mighty elongated arms, dēvis with tiny waists*

page 44	(footnote)		"[1]The village dance" should read [1]*This village dance*
page 50	para 1	line 3	"looks like a large nodle" should read *looks like a large noodle*
page 58	para 4	line 5	"Photo" should read *Photo 99*
page 58	para 5	line 1	"The snake in his case" should read *The snake in this case*
page 63	para 2	line 13	"and below" should read *and blow*
page 67	para 1	line 8	"or in this cities," should read *or in the cities*

Photographs:

page 2	para 1		Please omit reference to "Photo 2".
page 2	para 1	line 4	"Photo 3" should read *Photo 2*
page 5	para 1	line 1	"(the" should read *(also for the*
page 7	para 1	line 5	"in photos 32, 62" should read *in photos 33, 64*
page 12	para 1	line 1	"very elaborate village" should read *very elaborate village temple*
page 13	para 1	line 3	Please omit last three sentences, beginning with "The piece is "
page 23	para 2	line 2	"The saluting figures" should read *The saluting figure*
page 24	para 1	line 1	"and looser styel" should read *and looser style*
page 32	(caption)		"Polling out some mud" should read *Pulling out some mud*
page 34	para 1	line 1	"The figure beings" should read *The figure begins*
page 34	para 2	line 3	"to do done" should read *to be done*
page 45		line 3	Please omit "(preceding page)".
page 46	para 1	line 7	"photos with photos" should read *photos with photos 12-13, 61-62.*



Stephen Inglis

is a native of Vancouver, Canada. After completing a B. A. (anthropology) at the University of British Columbia, he earned an M. A. degree (museology) at Calcutta University. He is currently engaged in doctoral research on the social life of the potter community in Tamilnadu.

The study presented here was completed in 1975, while a student in the Certificate Course in Tamil at Madurai Kamaraj University.

Cover
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